

Seeing and Not Seeing: Parashat Toldot

by [Rabbi Joanna Samuels](#) • November 22nd, 2006 • [Torah](#), [Social Justice](#), [Economic Justice](#), [Jewish Life](#)

Parashat Toldot has as its centerpiece one of the more troubling stories in the Torah. Isaac, one hundred years old and blind, believes that he is close to death and prepares to bestow his blessing on his first-born son Esau. Unbeknownst to him, his wife Rebecca, many years before, while pregnant with Esau and his twin brother Jacob, was told by God that the older of the twins would serve the younger. Seeing her opportunity to actualize God's word, Rebecca concocts an elaborate scheme that will enable Jacob to receive the blessing from Isaac. The scheme is successful and Jacob indeed receives the blessing of the first born from Isaac. The reader is hardly spared Esau's torment when he discovers that he has been denied what is his. "Have you one blessing for me father? Bless me too father! ❖? Esau sobs to his father.

In seeking to understand how such a scheme could be successful, the Rabbis of the Midrash focused on the nature of Isaac's blindness. Picking up on a seemingly odd Hebrew grammar construction, the Rabbis understood the pasuk from the Torah, "And Isaac was blind in his seeing, ❖? as "Isaac was blind FROM seeing. ❖? This subtle change in grammar means that Isaac's experience of the world left him with an attenuated vision of reality. He was blind not only in a clinical, physical sense, but in his very ability to understand what was before him. The Midrashim point to Isaac's blindness, physical and emotional, as a direct result of what happened to him when he was bound on the altar by his father Abraham and spared from death at the last moment. One Midrash teaches, quite poignantly, that Isaac's blindness "was caused by the power of what he saw when he was bound on the altar. He saw into the heavens and saw the Shechinah. ❖? (Bereishit Rabbah 65:10)

This Midrash expresses the astute idea that very often, people can become blinded to the suffering in front of them because of suffering they have faced. For Isaac, the pain of his relationship with his father caused by the Akedah blinded him to the pain of his own sons. This operates in a less extreme but still pernicious way in our own community. On the level of peoplehood, many Jews are blinded by the suffering that we have faced throughout history, and the challenges we continue to face, and are unable to see the suffering that fills our world. The recent controversy at the UJA Federation of New York— where Federation executives were attacked for giving the moneys collected in its Israel Emergency Fund to Arab citizens of Israel as well as Jews — is a sad example of this type of blindness.

On a more personal level, as our world becomes more complex and frightening, it is tempting to close our eyes, to blind ourselves to the suffering around us — believing that ignorance is akin to protection. If we do not have to think about all the troubles of the world, perhaps we will be spared suffering, goes our flawed and desperate thinking. Ultimately, willful blindness just causes more pain — and we are bound to hear its effects: the cries of Esau and the cries of all of those people in our world who lack the most basic necessities of food, shelter, safety, and education.

The Midrash teaches that when Isaac looked up from the altar, he saw the Shechina — he saw the presence of God. Perhaps this is another way to understand our experiences of pain — that these experiences give us the ability to see more rather than less. And as well, that our own complex experience of history ought to compel us into seeing truly the suffering of our communities and our world, and perhaps, with sustained effort, actually alleviating some of it.

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