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Tragedy, Ownership, and Hospitality in Gerar: Lessons from Social Psychology

Abstract

Can the story of Isaac be read with tragedy in mind or is the second patriarch the comedic relief of Genesis? Scholars mostly see Isaac as the book's fool and thus laughable. Even more clearly so in Gen 26:7-11 which recounts how, during the hunger migration of Isaac and Rebekah to Philistine Gerar, Isaac presented Rebekah as his sister. Comparing Genesis 26 with similar stories about Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 12, 20) Isaac and Rebekah are in lesser danger than were Isaac's parents.

This work takes three steps to argue that the story supports the national identity of displaced Israelites. First, I argue that the wife-sister scene isn't necessarily less frightening than the other wife-sister scenes in Genesis 12 and Genesis 20. Second, I don't consider the whole Isaac cycle. The reason is that unlike others who try to understand the *character* of Isaac, as it comes out from Genesis 17-35, I care for the wife-sister motif as a device to engage with fears around immigration. Third, and most untraditionally, I use modern social psychology research on modern societies to speculate about the effect of the story on its original readership.

When hunger forces Isaac into the land of Gerar, he's so afraid of the locals that he lies to them, claiming that his wife, Rebekah, is his sister (*Genesis 26:7*). Like Isaac, the reader of the Bible is familiar with horror stories of local riffraff raping and murdering passersby (*Genesis 18, Judges 19*). Moreover, Isaac's father,

Abraham, claims that his own wife is his sister on two different occasions (*Genesis 12, Genesis 20*). The unique element for the Chapter 26 version appears when Abimelech king of Gerar looks through a window—scholars disagree whether Abimelech looks out of his house or into Isaac’s—only to see the so-called brother (יצחק Yitskhak) fooling around (מצחק metsakhek) with his alleged sister. Abimelech summons Isaac, and asks for a justification for the false pretense. Isaac answers with the embarrassing truth, he was afraid he would be killed by locals if they had known beautiful Rebekah wasn’t his sister. Abimelech grants Isaac and Rebekah immunity. This work will part from traditional scholarly in three major ways. First, I will argue that the wife-sister scene isn’t necessarily less frightening than the other “wife-sister” scenes in *Genesis 12* and *Genesis 20*. Second, I don’t consider the whole Isaac cycle. The reason is that unlike others who try to understand the *character* of Isaac, as it comes out from *Genesis 22-27*, I care for the wife-sister motif as a device to engage with fears around immigration. Third, and most untraditionally, I will use modern social psychology research on modern societies to speculate about the effect of the story on its original readership.

Isaac as a Fool

Scholars mostly see Isaac as the book’s fool and thus laughable. J. William Whedbee characterizes Isaac’s handling of the situation in Gerar as “dull-witted.” Isaac puts it in his head that someone would desire his wife and kill him for her so he declares her as his sister. Following Robert C. Culley, Whedbee argues that nobody wants Rebekah. Her beauty exists only in Isaac’s eyes. To make things worse, according to Whedbee, Isaac is caught fooling around with his “sister” when the king looks through Isaac’s window. The wordplay between Isaac’s name and the sexual act adds to the comicality of the situation. Finally, like any comedy, the fool gets the king’s undeserved protection, and is blessed by God with a hundred-fold harvest on what he sows (*Genesis 26:12*).

Joel S. Kaminsky regards Isaac as a prototype for the Yiddish humor stock character of the *schlemiel*, the lucky fool whose poor decisions usually hurt his unlucky partner, the *schlimazel*. For the sake of those less familiar with Yiddish culture, Kaminsky compares Isaac with the character of the foolish yet lucky Forest Gump from the eponymous 1994 film by Robert Zemeckis. Like Whedbee, Kaminsky points out that Rebekah was never taken to Abimelech's harem, and therefore the deception was probably unnecessary. Unlike Whedbee, however, Kaminsky doesn't think that Abimelech spies on Isaac but that Abimelech looks outside his own window, rendering Isaac's play with Rebekah even more reckless. Since the verb used in Hebrew is *Vayashkef*, a verb that elsewhere in the Bible refers to a person looking either from their home or a high point, I prefer Kaminsky's reading over the reading of Whedbee, and from now on imagine Isaac and Rebekah making out in a spot that is visible from Abimelech's window.

Elizabeth Boase also seems to imagine Abimelech in his house looking outside when she says that Isaac is caught because of his "somewhat foolish display of public affection toward Rebekah." I'm not sure why Boase thinks that it is only *somewhat* foolish for a man to publicly play around with the woman he claims to be his sister. I'll come back to this later. As for the threat, Boase, like Whedbee, and Kaminsky thinks that it is weak as Rebekah, unlike Sarah in the parallel stories in chapters 12 and 20, is never taken into the harem of the monarch.

In a recent essay, Anna Rozonoer, though she doesn't assess the risk level for Isaac, mentions that Abimelech doesn't have the opportunity to take Rebekah, as Isaac's foolish act interrupts the usual pattern of the narrative.

To summarize this point, scholars argue that the scene doesn't evoke fear for two reasons, one of plot and the other of use of wordplay. In terms of plot, unlike the comparable stories of chapter 12 and 20, the story in chapter 26 has Isaac and Rebekah together. She is never taken to the ruler's harem. As for wordplay, the term "Isaac Isaacs" guides the reader to a comic rather than tragic mood.

It Ain't Necessarily Comic

In contrast with Whedbee and Kaminsky, I argue that the function of the wordplay “Isaac Isaacs” is more appellative than comic. As Scott Noegel points out, Biblical appellative paronomasia (“name-giving wordplay”) rarely has humoristic intention. It’s significantly more common that the name functions as a summary of the person’s destiny or essence. In this case, the name “Isaac” reveals that in a crucial moment in his life, he would do something connected with the root Tsadi.Heit.Qof. I suggest that the appellative effect in Chapter 26 is that it was Isaac’s destiny to be publicly involved in an act of sexual nature. The appellative function in itself, I note, doesn’t contradict the possibility of comic effect, as the root discussed also has to do with laughter and other irresponsible behavior. What would decide the matter is one’s reading of the setting: objectively dangerous, or dangerous only in Isaac’s perspective.

I think there are reasons to fear for Isaac, and first among them is the uncertainty about Isaac’s Divine protection. In chapter 26:7-11, God is behind the scenes, unlike the intervening God in the stories about Abraham. In chapter 12, after the pharaoh takes Sarai to his palace, God punishes him and his house “heavily” (v. 17). The punishments are not detailed, but the pharaoh immediately regrets, and after a deliberation with Abraham—while the pharaoh knows that God protects Abram—the Egyptian gives Abram his wife and sends him away. In chapter 20, God comes to Abimelech in a dream to tell him that Sarah is Abraham’s wife. Abimelech returns Sarah to Abraham and gives both her and her husband property and the right to sit in his land. Isaac, in contrast, has to answer a king who has not been warned about the Divine protection of the accused.

Abraham’s *social* status is even more clearly superior to Isaac’s than his status as God’s chosen: Abraham becomes protected through a tie to the king while Isaac remains a migrant worker. When Abraham’s “sister” is taken to the palace, Abraham becomes the king’s brother-in-law. From that moment on, Abraham is protected from being harmed by anyone but the king himself. Truly, Abraham “rides the tiger” of his own lie but with God taking care of the king, and

the tie to the king taking care of everybody else, Abraham is immune. Isaac on the other hand has no protection other than God's promise (verses 2-5). One of the other men can take Rebekah by force or just kill Isaac who has no royal protection.

With the real danger in mind, one can suggest a new interpretation to Isaac's behavior, other than foolishness. Boase and others have defined Isaac's behavior as "foolish," or "somewhat foolish," specifically referring to verse 8 in which Isaac "plays" with Rebekah in a place visible from Abimelech's window. Another possible reading, though, is that Isaac doesn't act foolishly but rather desperately.

Immigrants, speaking more generally, have an ambivalent attitude toward local authorities. The immigrant doesn't want to be deported by the sovereign, and yet the immigrant might need the local law enforcement to protect the immigrant from street violence. Research from the 21st Century documents the ambivalent perspective of immigrants toward local police. Amada Armenta and Rocio Rosales showed that Mexican immigrants in LA and Philadelphia avoided the police, out of fear of deportation. Sadly, in the eyes of some police officers that fear implied that the immigrants were guilty of something. Lara, a Mexican immigrant to Philadelphia, for example, recalled an incident in which policemen pounded on their door, and barged in with their guns drawn, when Lara's husband opened the door. The policemen called everyone down, but Lara's cousin was so afraid that he hid under the bed on the second floor. When the policemen found the cousin under the bed they became convinced that the family was hiding a gun, a neighbor had reported the sound of a gunshot coming from the house, which was what brought the police there to begin with. After the policemen turned the apartment upside down, one of the officers looked at Lara's bike that was in the living room. This made Lara recall that a tire of the bike popped with a bang earlier in the evening and she suggested to the officers that the "gunshot" that the neighbors heard was that tire popping. The policemen checked the tires, began laughing, and left the scene without apologizing. Is this a comedic scene?

Surely it was a comedy to the officers who laughed (“Isaacked”) when they figured out it was all a mistake, and who, according to Lara’s recount, were still chuckling (*tsihkeku* in Hebrew, another verb from the root Tsadi. Heit. Qof). The cousin was surely a comedic character in their eyes, a grown up man hiding under a bed. To the family, to Lara, and to every person who ever resided in a country where they were not citizens, there is no comedy in that scene.

In cases of immediate physical danger, however, immigrants would contact the police because they wished for the law’s protection from local criminals. Noel, another Mexican immigrant to Philadelphia, resided for three years in a neighborhood where robberies of immigrants were commonplace, the robbers taking advantage of the immigrants’ fear of the police. One time, though, immediately after he had been robbed, Noel decided to complain. Although the police didn’t succeed in solving the crime, they treated Noel kindly, and later they patrolled the neighborhood making life “calmer” in the words of Noel who said the police patrols improved the life of all immigrants in the neighborhood. Immigrants, like all disempowered persons, try to stay out of trouble and that usually means staying out of the authorities’ attention. In times of immediate physical harm, however, immigrants may change their strategy and seek the involvement of the authorities, knowing that expelling is better than death.

Thus, when Isaac is desperate, he exposes to Abimelech that he, Isaac, is the husband, and seeks for the king’s protection. I suggest that Isaac’s behavior is so foolish that it can be read as intentional. By fondling Rebekah outside Abimelech’s window, Isaac makes sure that the king is the first to know for sure that Rebekah is Isaac’s wife, so that the husband and wife have the protection given to people who are now under trial in front of the king. That a story has elements that are tragic according to Aristotle’s *Poetics* doesn’t mean that the story is a tragedy. Cheryl Exum in her book, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative : Arrows of the Almighty* in which she analyses some narratives in the Bible through the prism of tragedy, argues that Aristotle’s theorizing of tragedy is

inadequate, so much so that even some of Euripides's tragedies can hardly be called tragedies according to Aristotle's theory. Exum prefers a minimal definition by which a tragedy needs to end in an irreversible catastrophe. Thus, Exum focuses her attention on the stories of Saul, Jephthah, and David, stories with heartbreaking catastrophes, all including the loss of children. The characters I discuss have happier fates than Saul, Jephthah, and David: Isaac doesn't lose a child nor is he a fully-sacrificed child; Rebekah isn't defiled nor ends her life without sons; Abimelech ends up with a vow from Isaac that their offspring will share the land. What is important, however, is that

The Ethnic Identity Aspect – Social Psychology

I understand that making conclusions from 21st Century Hispanic communities to Sixth century BCE Israelite communities isn't common practice. To decide whether or not current research in psychology is a legitimate tool in Biblical studies, one has to answer if the modern human mind and the ancient human mind are more similar to each other than they are different than each other. I hold they are similar in the sense that basic emotions, such as fear for one's life in a foreign land, transcend time, space, and culture. I remember, still, that circumstances of immigration in the Ancient Near East are different than those in the US and EU, where most researches are being done.

One has to move cautiously, and yet there is value in using modern psychology considering that the Bible is a religious text. While the father of modern psychology, Sigmund Freud, suspected religion, one of his most prominent students, Heinz Kohut (1913-1981), has remarked that Freud had ignored the supportive value of religion. If I analyze today's fears, I can assume that Genesis 26 is written to support a community with fears that are connected with immigration. The Bible may also be written with a legal ambition, but I don't need to accept the Bible's success in proving the right of the Israelites for the Promised Land to assume that the Bible had, and still has, value in supporting

humans through difficult emotions. To put it bluntly, I wouldn't care for that story much if I didn't believe that empathy creates a bridge between me and the people who first read the story. Therefore, I can support my empathic intuition through reading testimonies of current day immigrants.

What is left from a story, if I don't focus on character, is studying the place in life of the story among its original readership. As I have no documentation of the concerns of those immigrants into Zion, I suggest using the well-researched psychology of 21st Century immigrants. I agree with Nadav Na'aman who asserts, following Jakob Wöhrle, that the wife-sister stories are relevant in the exilic time (after 586 BCE), as a reflection of life in the diaspora. Those who had to flee Zion into the unknown east must have felt great fear of the locals they would meet during their wonders or on the way back. The sense of fear of loss of ethnic-religious identity can be strengthened by contemporary research. The 2019 report of Cory Cobb and others—"Perceived Discrimination and Well-Being among Unauthorized Hispanic Immigrants: The Moderating Role of Ethnic/Racial Group Identity Centrality,"—shows that the psychological well-being of Hispanic immigrants who face discrimination is better among those who have a stronger sense of ethnic identity. Interestingly enough, a 2003 research by Sellers and others shows the opposite results with African American groups: the psychological distress of African American college students was exacerbated with those who had high racial group identity. I would argue that the results are the opposite between ethnic groups and racial groups because while the racial group wishes to be accepted within the nation, the ethnic group is satisfied with physical survival without full cultural assimilation as the culture of the place of origin satisfies the emotional and spiritual needs of those who hold a strong identity of the place of origin. This way or the other, when Israelites in diaspora wrote the stories of their ancestors—Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Joseph—in exile, they wished to maintain the Israelite identity as well as lift the spirit of other Israelites

through the notion of what Auerbach would call *figura*: if Isaac and Rebekah went through diaspora hardships, survived, and thrived, so would their offspring.

A Final Remark in Defense of Reading Out of Context

When I offer this new reading of 26:7-11, I allow myself to leave the character of Isaac in Chapters 22, 24, and 27 untreated. I understand that the sophisticated Isaac that I suggest for Chapter 26 may seem out of character with the naïve Isaac, who believes his father on the way to the *Aqedah*, the passive Isaac whose bride to be has to come meet him, and the blind Isaac who is manipulated by Rebekah and Jacob to give his blessing to the son he loves less. I think that Isaac can be given a more complex reading in those chapters too, but I leave those reading out of the scope of this work.

I leave the context for later because I argue that reading the incident in Gerar on its own is as legitimate as reading it in the context of the whole Isaac cycle. Many authors and no fewer editors have touched the materials before they arrived at the form we have in front of us today. A reader who is interested in the state-of-the-art summary of the theories about the compilation history of chapter 26 as far as 2021 is welcome to read the articles by Boase, Na'aman, and Moshe Rachmuth's that appear in the bibliography below. To be sure, it's fair to read synchronically the whole Isaac cycle from the first promise of his birth (Genesis 17) to his death (Genesis 35). It is just as legitimate, though, to read only the 5 verses of the wife-sister story about Isaac in Gerar, looking for the meaning that the story can convey in itself, outside of the meaning it has once it's been located in the spot it has now between chapters 25, and 27. Each reading, contextual or out of context, lacks some things that can only be noticed in its counterpart reading, and delivers some effects that cannot be found in the other. This phenomenon is especially true in a text that wasn't written by one person, as is the case for *Genesis*.

Read alone, the incident in Gerar expresses collective fears that transcend time and geography. While Isaac and Rebekah aren't tragic characters in the Greek sense, their story creates effect of fear. I fear for Rebekah, among the rough Philistines, fearful for her body, her honor, and her life, under the flimsy protection of Isaac. I fear for Isaac, hungry, desperate and protected only by the promise of God. The literary expression of these fears, still understandable during the 21st Century, helped the Israelite diaspora keep a sense of group identity.

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