

TORAH TABLE TALK – PIRKE AVOT

Parental Favoritism: A Recipe for Tragedy

Parshat Toldot, Genesis 25:19 – 28:9

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren ז"ל, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

An anonymous sage in *Pirke Avot* used two biblical stories to draw a contrast between conditional and unconditional love. Jonathan, the son of King Saul, loved his dear friend, David, despite the fact that David was destined to replace him as Israel's future leader. His love for David was completely unselfish: he was prepared to celebrate his friend's success rather than obsess on his loss. In contrast to this story, we have the horrific story of Amnon and Tamar. When Amnon becomes infatuated with his half sister, Tamar, he forces himself upon her. No sooner does he satisfy his lust, his love turns to hate and he casts her aside. True love is motivated not by what we get but by a pure desire to give and care for another.

The themes of favoritism and rivalry underlie most of Genesis. We read about the conflict between Cain and Abel, the family discord between Hagar and Sarah, the rivalry between Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, as well as the conflict between Joseph and his brothers. In each case favoritism is a recipe for tragedy. In some cases, the Torah is honest in acknowledging that the parents were responsible for causing the discord in their household because they favored one child over another. The sages understood that when love is doled out unequally, it is often the source of conflict and alienation. Love that grows out of selfish interests is short lived and often becomes destructive.

It may be impossible for parents to avoid the accusation of favoritism. Children will discern favoritism even where it does not exist. They will count how many cookies their parents give each of their siblings and how many pictures they have of each one in their wallet. How much more important is it for parents to avoid the pitfalls of favoritism and to celebrate the unique interests, talents, and personality of each child.

Pirke Avot 5:19

Whenever love depends upon something and it passes, then the love passes away too. But if love does not depend upon some ulterior interest then the love will never pass away. What is an example of the love which depended upon some material advantage? That of Amnon for Tamar. And what is an example of the love which did not depend upon some ulterior interest? That of David and Jonathan.

Sources

Genesis 25:27-28

When the boys grew up, Esau became a skilled hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed in camp. Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebecca favored Jacob.

1 Samuel 18:1

When David finished speaking with Saul, Jonathan's soul became bound up with the soul of David; Jonathan loved David as himself.

11 Samuel 13:1, 15

This happened sometime afterward: Absalom, son of David had a beautiful sister named Tamar, and Amnon son of David became infatuated with her...then Amnon felt a very great loathing for her; indeed his loathing for her was greater than the passion he had felt for her.

Bereshit Rabbah 63:10

"Now Isaac loved Esau because of the game in his mouth." (Gen. 25:28) -- Choice meat for Isaac's palate and choice wine for Isaac's palate. "But Rebecca loved Jacob more and more" (ibid.): the more she heard his voice [engaged in study of Torah], the more she loved him.

Rashi Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak 25:28

"There was [the cunning of] a trap in his mouth" (Gen. 25:28). Esau knew how to entrap and deceive his father with his mouth, by asking such questions as "How should salt be tithed? How should straw be tithed?"

Robert Alter, The Five Books of Moses, A Translation with Commentary

Isaac loved Esau for the game that he brought him: The Hebrew says literally, “for the game in his mouth.” It is unclear whether the idiom suggests Esau as a kind of lion bringing game in its mouth or rather bringing game to put in his father’s mouth. The almost grotesque concreteness of the idiom may be associated with the absurdity of the material reason for Isaac’s paternal favoritism. Pointedly no reason is assigned for Rebecca’s love of Jacob in the next clause.

Commentary

I can imagine Esau asking his parents: “Who do you love more, Jacob or me,” or Jacob grumbling at the warmth his father showed Esau. Of course, Isaac and Rebecca would have had enough sense to tell their sons that they loved them equally but that does not mean that the brothers believed them. Favoritism exists everywhere, whether we like it or not. And where it doesn’t exist we often create it!

In two brief verses, our *Torah* portion sets the stage for the unfolding conflict between Jacob and Esau. Not only do the boys have completely different temperaments but each of the parents is each drawn to one of them. Isaac, who has always been a passive, is drawn to Esau who is something of a jock and an outdoorsman. Jacob is a Momma’s boy; Rebecca is attracted to the mild mannered son who enjoys hanging around the kitchen. This is a recipe for disaster as we see in the unfolding story of rivalry and intrigue. The contrast is drawn even more starkly at the opening verses of the *parshah*: Isaac is motivated by what he gets from Esau while Rebecca’s love appears to be ‘unconditional.’ This, however, does not make Rebecca’s favoritism any better or more justifiable. Jacob and Esau spend a life time seeking what the other has: Jacob seeks the approval of his father while Esau is angered by his mother’s rejection. Both sons feel unloved by the other parent.

Parental favoritism also plays a crucial role in the story of Joseph. Jacob apparently did not learn from his own upbringing how painful such favoritism could be. He singles out Joseph, much to the dismay of the other brothers. Even at the end of Genesis we confront favoritism. When Jacob blesses Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph is disturbed when his father appears to give ‘the better’ blessing to Ephraim, the younger son. What began with Cain and Abel ends with Ephraim and Manasseh. In the end there seems to be a reconciliation and recognition that each receives the blessing he needs. The two grandsons accept the blessings peacefully and without rancor. Today, when parents bless their children in the name of Ephraim and Manasseh they are really expressing the hope that their children will know that their blessings are equally felt.

I wonder whether favoritism is at the heart of our conflicts as Jews with the world around us. What do we mean when we claim to be ‘the chosen people?’ Are we not suggesting that God somehow favored our ancestors? While we are quick to explain that being chosenness has more to do with unique responsibilities than favoritism, others may not perceive it in that way. In the modern world we need to find a new language with which to speak about our uniqueness that does not imply favoritism!

Questions to Ponder

1. The Torah uses a strange expression to explain why Isaac favors Esau: “for the game in his mouth.” In whose mouth was the game found: Esau or Isaac? What do you think this expression means? What are some of the ways in which this expression is interpreted?
2. Make an argument in favor of Esau: that he is really a dutiful and devoted son; that he is not nearly as wicked as the sages make him out to be. Now make an argument critiquing Jacob.
3. Do you think favoritism is a real or perceived reality? How can parents avoid showing favoritism to one child over another? How can children avoid the jealousy and hurt they sometimes feel when they feel that their parents favor one child over another?
4. Do you feel that the expression “the chosen people” expresses a type of divine favoritism? Explain why or why not. What meaning does this expression have for us today?

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