

Dvar' torah

As we read in parashat Toldot, favoritism of children by their parents is a central theme. The Torah tells us why Jacob and Esau had such an intense sibling rivalry. Growing up, Isaac favored Esau because of his hunting skills and his ability to provide for his family. A Midrash in Genesis Rabbah suggested that Isaac was scared from almost being sacrificed to God so he admired strong people such as Esau. Rebecca favored Jacob because he was her wise son who preferred the company of his books. The Midrash tells us that Rebecca favored Jacob because God told her that her older child would serve the younger. The result of this favoritism was Rebecca helping Jacob steal his brother's birthright. In the long run, this was actually beneficial to the Jewish people, as Jacob became the one with the blessing, and eventually the blessing of the Jewish people who descended from him. But in the short term, the emotional damage of the relationship between the brothers was very severe. When Esau realized that Jacob had stolen the blessing from his father, Esau became enraged and swore he would kill Jacob.

I think that that favoritism by parents hurts sibling relationships. I want you all to think of a story where you thought that your parents were favoring one of your siblings. How did this

make you feel? Were you hurt, mad, jealous? Who were you most mad at your parents or your siblings?

Often people think of stories about favoritism that aren't actually true. Some acts are unavoidable by parents and aren't favoritism at all. For example, in the case of newborns or kids with disabilities parents need to focus more time and energy into certain situations. We all know it doesn't translate into loving one child more than another. Another example is when younger children (such as myself) feel like their older siblings are being favored. However, (as hard as it is for me to admit) older siblings simply have more privileges because they are older. Again it has nothing to do with parents favoring one child over another.

It's important to keep in mind that parents' favoritisms is only problematic when there are arbitrary differences in treatment as was the case with Jacob and Esau.

Take for instance the jealousy that can arise. Esau feels excluded because he sees that his younger brother is getting what he thinks should be his because he was the first born. In the result, his jealousy takes over his mind and he plots to kill his brother.

And the perceived favoritism leads to a lack of trust between the siblings and family. What was once a strong family bond is

now undermined. By favoring one child –whether that be Esau or Jacob – they can no longer seem as equals and work together.

Another consequence of favoritism is that Esau feels excluded. He feels unloved and that he no longer belongs. I do not think any child should be unloved.

Today when this type of family favoritism happens, sometimes the family members stop talking to each other – brother and sister, parent and child, no longer enjoying family time together. This can be very sad as families should be happy together and be able to get along.

If a child feels excluded, unloved and not part of the family, he can feel like he was not meant to be. He or she could feel like their life was a waste, filled with anger and bitterness, instead of joy and belonging. This can hurt one's feelings and sense of well-being. It could destroy the person's entire life.

My Bar Mitzvah taught me that some situations are unavoidable and are not favoritism at all. It has also taught me that favoring one person over another without good reason can be harmful and life destroying, ... like being the youngest in my house. The actual, painful favoritism can have real consequences and we need to think about how our words and actions make

Rabbi Brown 2015-11-25 5:01 PM

Comment [1]: Can you talk here about some of the consequences that come about when the problematic favoritism happens? What kind of emotional damage happens? What does the story of what happens to Jacob and Esau teach us about this?

people feel. We need to make sure that we simply do not favor children because they are the first-born or because one is a boy or a girl. It is important to treat everyone the same.
