"Teach a child according to his own way." [Proverbs 22:6]
TOLDOT 5780
RABBI DAN MOSKOVITZ

We have three children, two boys and a girl. Since they were old enough to realize that they outnumbered us and that we were in a zone defense (to use a basketball or football analogy) they have tried to get over on the other two by appealing for favoritism from myself or my wife. Arguing as they often do that while those household rules may apply to their two siblings, they should not apply to themselves because they know they are our favorite.

This ploy is from time to time followed up by privately (secretively) asking us, which of our three children is our favorite? I assume every parent of multiples has faced the same question? Our version of the answer is, "we love you all equally, and we love you each differently". It doesn't satisfy them by any stretch but it's both honest and philosophical enough to at least let them know we are on to their game and are putting up a strong defense.

In this week's Torah Portion (Toldot, Genesis 25:19-28:9) Isaac and Rebekah, the parents of twin boys Jacob and Esau are not so careful or circumspect with regard to showing favoritism to one child over the other.

From the outset we are told that these two children are very different beings.

> *"Two peoples are in your belly; two nations shall branch off from each other [as they emerge from your womb]. One people shall prevail over the other; the elder shall serve the younger." (Gen 25:22-23).*

> *"When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter and a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a homespun man keeping to the tents." (Gen 25:27)*

The rabbinic commentators[1] point to the phrase, "When the boys grew up" in verse 27 to emphasize that while it was prophesised and known to Rebekah that the boys would be quite different, she nevertheless raised them in precisely the same environment and with the same methodology. This was their mistake.

Rebekah (and Isaac) did not take into account that both children needed an upbringing that was curated for their specific social-emotional needs. Even though children may come from the same parents, may even, as is the case in this week's parsha, be the same age, born as twins; no two children are the same; just as no two people are the same. Therefore, how we raise them must be as different from another as they are from each other.

[1] Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, commentary on Genesis 25:27

Rabbi Nachum Amsel concludes that, “Esau rebelled against this upbringing, which did not suit his personality and temperament and turned to the evil path. Had Isaac and Rebecca realized Esau’s unique personality traits early on, they could have raised him differently and he could also have become righteous like Jacob.”[2]

But their mistakes as parents, like those of all parents doesn’t end there. In the next verse they take ‘parenting fails’ to a whole new level.

> *Isaac favored Esau, because he [Esau] put game in his mouth, but Rebekah favored Jacob. (Gen 25:28)*

So monumental is this type of ‘parenting fail’ that rabbis attribute another instance of parental favoritism, Jacob toward his son Joseph, as the reason why the Israelites ended up in slavery in Egypt for 435 years.

> *A person should never distinguish one of his sons from among the other sons by giving him preferential treatment. As, due to the weight of two sela of fine wool that Jacob gave to Joseph, beyond what he gave the rest of his sons, in making him the striped coat (Coat of Many Colors), his brothers became jealous of him and the matter unfolded and our forefathers descended to Egypt. (Shabbat 10b)*

That’s a pretty compelling argument for not showing favoritism toward one of your children, it might end in the enslavement of an entire people for four centuries!

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a 19th century German Orthodox rabbi and widely considered the founder of contemporary Orthodox Judaism extracts from our Parashah not only what Isaac and Rebekah should not have done, but more constructively, what they could have done for a better result.

> *"The striking contrast in the grandchildren of Abraham may have been due not so much to a difference in their temperaments as to a mistake in the way they were brought up. No attention was paid to their differences while they were little; both were given the same teaching and educational treatment. Had Isaac and Rebekah studied the nature of Esau and spoken to that nature, who can say how different the history of the ages may have been recorded." (Commentary On The Torah, Genesis 25:27)*

So, while Isaac and Rebekah love their children <u>differently</u>, they are thwarted because they do not love them <u>equally</u>. They do not give the same care and attention to Esau’s spiritual and emotional well-being as they nurture in his brother. Conversely, they

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[2] Rabbi Nachum Amsel, <u>The Jewish Encyclopedia of Moral and Ethical Issues</u> Jason Aronson Publishing, Feb 1 1996 p.

nurture Jacob's emotional intelligence but fail to challenge him to literally move outside his comfort zone (the family tent) and encounter the harsh realities of the natural world.

It is the great challenge of parenthood, particularly today in our modern 'let the child lead' approach to parenting.

We go to great lengths to support and reinforce our children's interests and aspirations, and that on its face seems wise and loving. How many coaches, tutors, clinics have we enrolled our children in to pursue their all-star or celebrity dreams, even as we know that the fraction of famous people on the whole planet is roughly 0.0086 percent. Which is to say, almost no one is famous.[3]

And still even if our children are far more likely to watch an awards show than walk the red carpet these are important and critical investments in support of their hopes and dreams. As parents we will stop at nothing to see their dreams fulfilled. But what of pushing them toward the things they have not dreamed of yet? Exposing them to those experiences and challenges they would never think to consider or are actively trying to avoid.

Are we obligated to help them confront their fears, just as we are to embrace their joys?

In a favorite teaching from Talmud we are taught that among a parent's responsibilities to their child which understandably include to teach them a trade and to teach them Torah, we are also told we must teach them how to swim.[4]

Why? What is swimming?

Swimming is curiosity; swimming is navigating the rough waters of life, without any support, entirely on your own. We teach a child to swim so that they we will know courage, know to overcome fear. So that they will know that if they can swim, if they can call upon the resources of courage that dwell within each soul, let go of the fear and venture out into the uncertain, unknown, then, knowing how to swim they can always make it to the other side of any divide. They can do anything, particularly that which doesn't come naturally or is unfamiliar.

Among the many moments Isaac and Rebekah would probably (as with most parents) like to 'have a do-over'; I think upon reflection they would have taught their children how to swim. How to navigate to the distant shore, even when the waters are rough, even when it is uncomfortable, even when you don't feel like swimming; and they would have cheered for both of them equally.

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[3] REBECCA J. ROSEN, The Atlantic, "Something Like 0.0086% of the World Is Famous" JAN 22, 2013

[4] Talmud Kiddushin 29a