

## ***Favor vs. Favoritism***

Parashat Vayechi; January 3, 2015/12 Tevet 5775

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I'm pretty sure I know about favoritism. In fact, I think I have been the recipient of it in my life in a number of different ways. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting that I'm the favorite anything...son, grandson, nephew... I want you to think about favoritism not in terms of favorite, but in terms of favor. If you have been shown favor by someone, it doesn't necessarily mean that you have been selected as the best, the greatest, the most loved of all time to the exclusion or marginalization of all others. What it means is that in a particular moment of time, perhaps a crucial, life transforming moment, you have been given the attention, the consideration, the care, the **favor** that helped you emerge from that experience stronger, healthier, and more reassured than you might otherwise have been. That's the favoritism I'm talking about. But more about that in a little while...

There is a very emotional scene near the beginning of our parasha, when Jacob, approaching the end of his life, summons two of his grandchildren—Ephraim and Menashe, for some extraordinary special treatment. Don't forget just last week we read in parashat Vayigash that Jacob had 66 direct descendants in Egypt! Suffice it to say that he had a lot of grandchildren...but only two of them are brought forward for a rather bizarre adoption ceremony, whereby Jacob proclaims in the presence of the boys' father, Joseph, that these two grandchildren, unlike all the others, will now be regarded as Jacob's own. *Sh'nei vanecha ha'noldim lecha*, these two boys who were born to you, Jacob tells Joseph, *li hem...*they're mine! No less than any of my other children, the grandfather states, Ephraim and Menashe are now to be considered my children. Now it's a good thing that Joseph's wife wasn't there for that conversation, because she may not have taken so kindly to her children being adopted by her father-in-law. Not only that, but good gracious Jacob, haven't you learned anything from your own history?? Jacob spent decades running from his own brother Esau because he received favored treatment from his parents. Jacob's son Joseph was the victim of hatred and jealousy by his brothers because of his favored treatment. And then of course there was Isaac and Ishmael, and Cain and Abel, and you know how that story ended. Moreover, when Jacob blesses Ephraim and Menashe he gives preferential treatment not only to them compared to all his other

grandchildren, but also to Ephraim the younger over Menashe the older! Is he suffering from amnesia? Or maybe dementia? He is 147 years old after all, maybe his faculties are a bit dimmed and his memory isn't as sharp as it once was...

Or maybe the elderly patriarch is actually not showing favoritism to Ephraim and Menashe at all. Maybe instead he is showing them favor, at a critical time when they needed the kind of special attention that only their Zaydie Jacob could provide. You see the difference between these two grandchildren and all of the others is that they were born in Egypt, separate and apart from the rest of their family. All of Jacob's other grandchildren grew up among aunts and uncles and cousins. They had the precious support system of family and a childhood back in Canaan, where they were all raised together. Think about the family meals, the special celebrations, the holidays and sacred times—both happy and sad where they had each other to rely on, to celebrate with, and to be comforted by. They also heard the family stories and affection exchanged among family when they are gathered together. Ephraim and Menashe had none of that. They grew up far from family and very much as Egyptians rather than as members of the tribe of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jacob is certainly not saying Ephraim and Menashe, who by the way I barely know, are my favorite grandchildren. Rather he is trying to restore for them a connection to the family that they may never before have felt. By showing them love and attention, he is even in the waning moments of his life, trying to elevate their esteem in the family, and make sure they feel as important and intrinsic to the family as any other relative. And in that stroke of grandfatherly affection, I think he accomplishes something remarkable.

Speaking very personally, I grew up in the embrace of my grandparents, and my aunts and uncles who favored me with incalculable attention in a crucial time of my life. Shortly after my parents' divorce, my mother and I moved into my maternal grandparents' house. My grandparents, *zichronam livracha*, many years after raising their own children and approaching their own retirement, all of a sudden had this little kid in their house. I've heard people joke that the best thing about being a grandparent is that you can give the kids back to their parents at the end of the day. You get to spoil them and enjoy all the perks, but none of the tsurris. Not so for my grandparents. They set up a bedroom in their house for me, complete with Superman posters and bedding. They interacted with me in ways much more similar to parents than grandparents; I started school at the elementary school down the block from their house. I did my homework at

their kitchen table; had playdates at their house. And my grandfather specifically became the lead male in my life in those years...we had a garden in the back yard together, we sang in the shower together, I waited anxiously for him every evening to come home from work. Now my Nana and Papa had 5 other grandchildren at the time...and none of those grandchildren got to live with them, or spend that kind of intense, quality time with them. Did that mean that I was their favorite, compared to my other first cousins? Of course not. But it did mean that my grandparents bestowed favor upon me during a time of tremendous upheaval and instability, and may well have rescued me from a measure of pain and despair that I did not experience because of that special favor.

The Talmud teaches us: *Le'olam lo yeshanei adam b'no bein ha'banim*, a person should never express favoritism toward one child over another.<sup>1</sup> I agree with that. Every child is precious and significant in their own way. Perhaps that's why Jacob switched his hands on the heads of Ephraim and Menashe rather than physically moving the children into the position he wanted them. Perhaps he is recognizing that adults need to meet children where they are rather than trying so hard to push them to become something they are not. But more than that, I believe that our holy patriarch is teaching us that while showing favoritism is almost always problematic, showing favor is not. Favoritism often results when kids conform to our vision of who and what they should be, what they should be interested in, what life choices they should make. But showing favor is recognizing that children are their own individual, distinctive human beings, who at times require unique encouragement, care, and support.

The tradition teaches that back when Joseph was in disguise from his brothers, he spoke to them through a translator, not wanting them to know that he could speak and understand Hebrew. The translator according to the Midrash was Joseph's older son Menashe. Ephraim, on the other hand, could not have been the translator because, being younger, he was all the more removed from Hebrew and the connection to his ancestry. Even his name, Ephraim, is said to be an Egyptian name in comparison to Menashe which is clearly derived from Hebrew. It has been pointed out that many Egyptian names contained the p and r sounds or both...Potiphar, Paro, Tzafnat Paneach, Osnat bat Potiphara...just like Ephraim. Because he was even more distant from family and tradition than Menashe, Joseph drew him closer with his right hand not his left.

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<sup>1</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 10b

Again, understanding Ephraim's unique needs; not favoritism but favor. In order to be the very best parents and grandparents, friends, and caretakers of others, we should learn to show more favor. To be attuned enough to know what the people in our lives need from us most at any given moment. And we should be mature enough to realize that we will win the affection and loyalty of others not by making them feel that they are our favorites, but by giving them the confidence to know that they will have our loving, generous, heartfelt *favor* whenever they need it.