

Parenting Lessons from The Crown & Parashat Toledot

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Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

The other night I was making dinner...a stir-fry, in case you were wondering, and as I was cubing the chicken, and chopping the vegetables, I was watching *The Crown* out of the corner of my eye. *The Crown* is a British television show on Netflix, now in its fourth season that spans the life and times of Queen Elizabeth II's reign. It is a magnificent series; the acting is superb, and now in the fourth season I'm actually starting to remember some of the events it covers! I promise not to mention any actual spoilers, but as I was dicing my peppers for the stir-fry I heard Gillian Anderson, who plays Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher break down and cry during her weekly private audience with the Queen. Can you imagine that? The Iron Lady getting emotional?! As the Queen pours Thatcher a glass of whiskey to soothe her nerves, I hear Thatcher say, 'I have two children, twins. Mark and Carol. 28 years old. And my favorite, Mark, a very special child, the kind of son any mother would dream of having has gone missing...' in an off-roading race in the Sahara Desert. It's a good thing I didn't slice my finger off! I couldn't believe what I heard! Did she really just say that he was *her favorite child*?! The Queen was evidently as taken aback as I was because when she relates the story to Prince Philip she says, "Who would do that---openly admit to preferring one child to another-especially twins." I yelled out, I know who: Isaac and Rebekkah, Yitzchak and Rivka in this week's Torah portion! But that's not what Prince Philip said. Instead, he answered without hesitation, "Any honest parent would admit to having a favorite." Without skipping a beat Philip says his favorite of their four children was Princess Anne. The Queen can't believe her ears. And I couldn't believe mine. *Any honest parent would admit to having a favorite...*

I'm sure that if I asked any parent of more than one child who may be watching or listening right now whether you have a favorite child, your immediate response would be "Absolutely not!" You'd probably say something like, "I love all of my children equally." From our very first exposure to the stories of Genesis, and of Parashat Toledot especially, we are conditioned that parental favoritism wreaks havoc upon families. Interestingly though, many studies indicate that parents often do favor one child over another. Perhaps because they share more interests, or they have more in common with that child compared to the others. But those studies also show that parents are guilt-ridden over the thought of favoritism...and they worry that if that detail happened to leak out, it would cause irreparable damage and pain to the family.

The Torah appears to describe Isaac and Rebekkah as parents who direct their love and attention exclusively to one of their two twins. *Va'ye-ehav Yitzchak et Eisav ki tzayid be'fiv, ve'Rivka ohevet et Ya'akov*. "Isaac loved Esau," and the Torah adds, "because he had a taste for game." "And Rebekka loves Jacob." (Genesis 26:28) We aren't told that Rebekka also loved Esau or that Isaac also loved Jacob, and this detail did not go unnoticed by our Sages. The 17th Century Lithuanian commentator *Siftei Kohan* argued that since Isaac understood his son Esau's tendency toward violence and perhaps even evil, Isaac intentionally took Esau under his wing, showered him with affection and attention in order to bring him back to the path of righteousness. It goes without saying though that he loved Jacob. And the modern Israeli Bible scholar Nechama Leibowitz refers to a 16th Century Italian text that claims that Rebekka indeed loved Esau--so much that she acted to prevent him from becoming a murderer, to prevent him from killing his brother, which would

estrangle him from her and from the family. This explains Rebekka's shriek in Genesis 27:45 *Lamah eshkal gam-shneichem yom echad, Let me not lose you both at the same time!* What at first blush looks like parents favoring one child over another is actually, according to these commentaries, parents understanding the unique needs of each of their children and acting accordingly.

I read an interview that Carol Thatcher once gave to the British press about her powerful mother. She said without a doubt that she was the less favored child. She said that Margaret Thatcher sometimes couldn't even remember her name, and instead called her any number of her secretaries' names before getting to *Carol*. But Mark was the apple of her eye. Mark could do no wrong. "It's not that I felt unloved," Carol said, "it's that I never felt I made the grade." In Margaret Thatcher's childhood she was enamored with her own father, himself a politician, who always encouraged her ambitions and dreams. She had a hard time identifying with her mother, a housewife, who didn't seem to wish for anything more in life. It has been speculated that Margaret Thatcher generally had a hard time with women, from her daughter Carol to Queen Elizabeth herself!

Parents have to be conscious of how our own backgrounds affect how we raise our children. It is possible that Rebekka, whose overbearing brother Lavan was a con artist and a pagan, was inspired by Jacob's gentle manner, his devotion to family, his piety and scholarly nature. We might understand how Isaac, the most docile and quiet of the patriarchs was invigorated by his son Esau, the uber-masculine hunter and carnivore. Parents should be aware of what animates our relationships with our children, and be able to detect whether our own life experiences cross a line and turn into unfair or unrealistic expectations of our children--or even cause us to openly favor one over the other. While we invest a tremendous amount of time, resources, emotions, and energy into raising our children, they are not, after all, extensions of ourselves, and their purpose is not to carry our baggage into the next generation.

After Prince Philip divulges his preference for Anne, Queen Elizabeth insists that each of her four children come to meet with her privately, presumably so she can figure out if she actually does have a favorite. What she learns instead is that each of her children are actually suffering for a variety of reasons, in their marriages, in school, in their relationships, and that somehow it is all connected to how they were raised. She wonders aloud to Philip if allowing the nannies to bathe the children while she sat back and watched rather than bathing them herself when they were babies began a pattern of hands-off parenting that might have led to her children's misery later in life. She ponders whether leaving them behind while she and Philip went away for months at a time on royal globetrotting missions might have deprived them of parental closeness. Of course, these are the parts of the show that are dramatized and conjured in the minds of the writers and directors. But what parent hasn't reflected on what they might have done better if given another chance, or how they could have been more present, more supportive, more attentive to their children's needs? I know I have. Earlier seasons of *The Crown* detail Philip's agonizing relationship with his own father Prince Andrew. Many of us have stories from our childhoods that were painful, disappointing, and far from ideal. Becoming a parent can either be an opportunity to re-visit those unfortunate experiences on our children, or a fresh start on the adventure of parenthood.

In chapter 25 of Genesis, the Torah says “Vayigd’lu ha’ne-arim,” meaning ‘and they grew up;’ Esau and Jacob grew up together. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch whose 19th century German Bible translation and commentary opened it up to many more modern readers notices that this phrase implies that both boys grew up in exactly the same way—which Hirsch describes as a mistake on the part of their parents Isaac and Rebekka! By overlooking the differences in each child, the specific needs both educationally and otherwise, they contributed to the breakdown in the relationships of the brothers and the wildly different paths they took in life, according to Rav Hirsch.

Paying careful attention to what each of our children’s unique needs are is not favoritism, it is good parenting. Remembering that we don’t have to replicate in our parenting all of the same techniques and expectations that we were raised with is not disrespectful to our parents, it is healthy and altogether appropriate. As a child of divorced parents and a father I only saw occasionally, I wondered before ever becoming a parent if I would be any good at this fatherhood thing. I’m sure I overcompensate at times because of my own background, but I have embraced the gift of parenthood, and there is nothing that makes me happier or more proud in this world than being a father to my children. God knows it’s hard work. God knows we make plenty of mistakes along the way...there are many very good parents, but no perfect parents. What I learn from our matriarchs and patriarchs, and even from the monarchs, is that we should strive to treat each child as the unique individual that they are; paying attention to what that child needs to thrive; and even if we might feel closer at times to one child than another, that our children should know without a doubt that they are loved unconditionally by their parents.

And kids, cut your parents a little slack as well. Parenting may be the most incredible, joyful, remarkable job in the world, but it’s also, hands down, the hardest. Even if we don’t always show our love in all the right ways, give us the benefit of the doubt. We created you; we brought you into this world; we want what’s best for you. Maybe that’s why the only human beings that the Torah commands us to honor is our parents!

On this Thanksgiving when I will unfortunately not be able to be with my parents, but I will thank God be with all of my children, I know I will feel deep gratitude both for those who gave me life, and for those I to whom I have given it. And in the words of the Prophet Malachi, who we heard in today’s haftarah, *Ve’heishiv lev-avot al banim, v’lev banim al avotam*...May God revitalize and renew the hearts of parents toward their children and children toward their parents. Shabbat Shalom and Happy Thanksgiving.