

**Parshat Vayishlach:  
The Dangers of Favoritism**  
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*Class of 2019*

The conflict between Joseph and his brothers began much earlier. Before Joseph ever tattles or has any dreams, before there was any coat, Joseph's brothers were already primed to hate him, because of their father Jacob's behavior towards them in this week's Parshah - Parshat Vayishlach.

Parshat Vayishlach begins with Jacob preparing to confront his own brother Esau; the brother whose birthright he stole and who Esau plotted to kill. Jacob, not expecting a happy family reunion, strategizes how to arrange his family to face this potential threat. In Bereishit 33:1-2 it states:

Looking up, Jacob saw Esau coming, accompanied by four hundred men. He divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two maids, putting the maids and their children first, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last.

וַיִּשָׂא יַעֲקֹב עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה עֹשֹׂו בָא וְעִמּוֹ אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת  
אִישׁ וַיַּחַץ אֶת־הַיְלָדִים עַל־לֵאָה וְעַל־רָחֵל וְעַל שְׁתֵּי  
הַשִּׁפּוֹת: וַיִּשֶׂם אֶת־הַשִּׁפּוֹת וְאֶת־יְלֵדֵיהֶן רִאשׁוֹנָה  
וְאֶת־לֵאָה וְיְלֵדֶיהָ אַחֲרָיִם וְאֶת־רָחֵל וְאֶת־יוֹסֵף אַחֲרָיִם:

Jacob splits up his family. He puts the "maids," (Bilha and Zilpah) and their children first in line to meet Esau. Leah and her children come next, and Rachel and her son Joseph come last. One could have imagined that perhaps Jacob would choose to order his family based on the ages of the children, desiring to put the oldest children ahead of the younger ones. But that theory does not make sense as Leah's children are oldest and therefore would have put her first in line, followed by Rachel's handmaid Bilha, then Leah's handmaid Zilpah, and then Rachel and Joseph.

Instead our commentaries offer a different interpretation. Rashi here explains quite succinctly: אַחֲרוֹן - the farther back, the more beloved. Meaning, the farther back in line, the more beloved that wife and child were to Jacob. The other commentaries seem to follow Rashi's train of thought. The Ibn Ezra expands upon Rashi's interpretation and suggests that: וַיִּמְלֵטוּ - Perhaps by Jacob's placing Rachel and Joseph last in line, they would have a better chance of escaping Esau. Yet Radak takes this reasoning a step further by drawing it out to its chilling and natural conclusion, explaining: וַיִּשֶׂם אַחֲרוֹן אַחֲרוֹן חֲבִיב אוֹלֵי יוֹנוֹ כַּעֲסוֹ בְּהַרְיַגַת הַרְאִשׁוֹנִים וַיִּנַּח - the last ones - Jacob placed his most beloved family members last, hoping that Esau's anger would be calmed from killing the first, and thus he would spare those behind.

According to these commentaries, not only does Jacob have a favorite wife and child, he literally organizes his family based on whose life he values most. Imagine you suspected your parents favored your sibling over you. Perhaps you would be upset. Jealous, even. Now imagine your parents not only confirmed who their favorite child was, but chose to put your life on the line to give your sibling a chance for survival. Here we see that Jacob's favoritism towards Joseph did not simply manifest itself through the gift of a coat, but came at the expense of the brothers when

Jacob publicly chose to prioritize Joseph's life over theirs.

Radak's interpretation points to the elephant in the room - that Joseph's brothers were used by their father as human shields to protect his favorite son. It certainly does not help matters when, later in the Parshah, Jacob appears seemingly indifferent to the rape of Leah's daughter Dina, further compounding the brother's feeling that their father is only invested in Rachel's children.

This would explain why by the time we get to Parshat Vayeshev, all lines of communication between Joseph and his brothers has broken down. It also explains why with seemingly little prompting the brothers are so quick to suggest killing him. How best to get revenge on the father who was willing to sacrifice your life for the sake of your sibling, than by showing that despite his best efforts, Jacob's plan did not prevail?

This is certainly a dark moment for Jacob's children. And yet, incredibly, the story of Joseph and his brothers does not end here. Despite their difficult beginnings, despite the trauma that both the brothers and Joseph endure, reconciliation does come. After much time and reflection, Joseph and his brothers manage to work through their painful past and reunite as a family. May their efforts be a guiding light for us all.



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