Relationships in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Toldot: Building Loving Relationships With Our Children

How Can Parents Love Their Children Without Favoritism?

Do Parents Condition Their Children or Recognize Their True Nature?

Growing up as one of three daughters, I experienced my share of intricate family dynamics, comparison, and sibling rivalry. It seems to me that we were all vying for our parents' acceptance, acknowledgment, approval, and recognition. Since my sisters were very thin, I developed a distorted self-image, perceiving myself as fat – a feeling that has lingered even to this day. More than we realize, our childhood home shapes how we see ourselves, develop our personalities, and relate to our spouses, children, and everyone else in life.

Within a family, parents may condition their children to develop certain characteristics that cause them to identify with particular roles. As the firstborn, I was considered the intellectual, my middle sister the artist, and my youngest sister the charming, mischievous one. We actually matured into those very roles. Yet, being rebellious as well, I resisted the limitations of my assigned identity and insisted, perhaps unconsciously, on claiming artistic gifts of my own. Looking back, I wonder: did our parents recognize our innate qualities, or did their expectations encourage us to become the people they perceived us to be? Were they discerning our potential or shaping its expression?

Most likely, both nature and nurture play a part. The qualities parents perceive and encourage in their children may flourish, while other gifts remain unexplored. A child repeatedly praised for being intellectual may invest in developing her mind without daring to pick up a paintbrush. This places a responsibility upon us as parents: to recognize our children's strengths while leaving room for a wider range of abilities we have yet to discover. Even loving familiarity can lead us to assume that we already know who our children are and what they can become.

In Parashat Toldot, Yitzchak and Rivkah appear to perceive their sons very differently. Yitzchak sees potential in Esav that his outward conduct does not readily reveal, while Rivkah discerns more clearly which son is suited to carry forward their spiritual legacy.

Here, the parent who sees broader possibilities is not the one whose judgment guides the blessing to its rightful recipient. Rivkah's more sharply defined understanding proves essential: she recognizes that Ya'acov, rather than Esav, must receive the blessing. Their different perspectives invite us to explore a delicate parental task: how can we remain open to our children's hidden potential while honestly discerning their character and the path suited to them?

Does Loving Each Child Differently Mean Loving One More?

בְּרֵאשִׁית פֶּרֶק כה פָּסוּק כח וְיִצְחָק אֶת־עֵשָׂו כִּי־צַיִד בְּפִיו וְרִבְקָה אֹהֶבֶת אֶת־יַעֲקֹב׃

"Yitzchak loved Esav because game was in his mouth, but Rivkah loved Ya'acov" (*Bereishit* 25:28).

The way we perceive our children can shape not only their developing identities but also our emotional connection with them. We want each child to feel cherished, yet our children can awaken very different feelings within us. Closeness may come more naturally with a child who shares our interests, confirms our expectations, and understands us almost without words. Another may challenge our patience or make choices we struggle to comprehend. Does being drawn more naturally to one child mean that we love the others less?

The Torah's description of Yitzchak's love for Esav and Rivkah's love for Ya'acov invites us to examine these differences honestly. The verse identifies a particular attachment each parent felt; it does not

Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin
Holistic Torah for Women on the Land
02-993-4945 | info@berotbatayin.org
www.berotbatayin.org

explicitly say that either parent lacked love for the other son.

Indeed, Radak explains that Yitzchak loved Ya'acov even more than Esav; the Torah specifies his love for Esav to explain the particular affection inspired by the food Esav brought him (Radak, *Bereishit* 25:28). Still, it raises a question that reaches into every family: how do we honor our different connections with our children while ensuring that each feels secure in our love? Shlomo HaMelech teaches the importance of attending to a child's individual nature:

חֲנֹךְ לַנַּעַר עַל־פִּי דַרְכּוֹ גַּם כִּי־יַזְקִין לֹא־יָסוּר מִמֶּנָּה: מַשְׁלֵי פֶּרֶק כב פָּסוּק ו

"Educate a child according to his way; even when he grows old, he will not depart from it" (*Mishlei* 22:6).

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch applies this principle directly to Ya'acov and Esav. He explains that they received the same teaching and educational treatment without sufficient attention to their different natures. Each child needed an approach suited to his particular tendencies, through which his distinctive qualities could be developed toward the shared purpose of serving Hashem (Hirsch, *Bereishit* 25:27). We can extend this principle to our expressions of parental love: the same devotion may need to take a different form for each child.

Our children do not need identical relationships with us. One needs conversation, another quiet companionship, and another practical involvement in what matters to them. Even as adults, they may seek different expressions of parental care. Fairness therefore requires attentiveness to the individual. We can ask ourselves: Do I know what makes this child feel loved? Have I made room for a personality different from my own? The child whose company comes most easily may receive our attention naturally, while another needs us to make a more conscious effort to enter their world.

How Can We Give Each Child a Distinct Place in Our Hearts?

The Torah gives a reason for Yitzchak's affection for Esav, while simply stating that Rivkah loves Ya'acov. Rabbi Yitzchak Karo distinguishes between love arising from pleasure and love arising from goodness. Yitzchak enjoyed what Esav provided, whereas Rivkah loved the goodness she recognized in Ya'acov (Rabbi Yitzchak Karo, *Toldot Yitzchak*, *Bereishit* 25:28). Rabbi Ephraim of Luntshits sharpens this distinction: Yitzchak's affection was aroused when Esav supplied him with game. Rivkah's love, however, was not dependent upon such a benefit and therefore endured (*Kli Yakar*, *Bereishit* 25:28).

In a relationship where affection is dependent on performance, children can become preoccupied with winning their parents' approval. As parents, we must be careful not to condition our children to become people pleasers, motivated by the need for approval. When our children were young and did something exceptionally good or shared a beautiful D'var Torah at the table, my husband always insisted that we refrain from applauding. He wanted them to value doing good and learning Torah for their own sake, without becoming dependent on praise. Our response can convey warmth and recognition while encouraging an inner sense of purpose that does not depend on others' approval.

Perhaps the more difficult test comes when a child disappoints us. Can we express concern about their choices while continuing to show warmth toward them? Can we listen without turning every conversation into an opportunity to correct? A child needs to know that there is room in our hearts for their struggles as well as their achievements. Our guidance can reach our children's hearts more readily when they feel secure in their relationship with us.

The *Pesikta Zutarta* notices that the Torah writes Rivkah "loves..." in the present tense, describing an ongoing love that increased each day. This explains why Ya'acov listened to her voice (Pesikta Zutarta, *Bereishit* 25:28). Love deepens through daily experience of attentiveness and shared life. As parents, we can nurture this closeness by making time for each child individually and becoming interested in what matters to them. Our responsibility is especially great toward the child who does not naturally seek our company.

Can Our Expectations Make a Child Feel Less Loved?

Our Sages teach that a person should never distinguish one child from the others through preferential treatment. They point to the additional wool Ya'acov gave Yosef, which aroused his brothers' jealousy and ultimately led to our ancestors' descent to Egypt (*Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat* 10b). This warning invites us to consider the comparisons our words can create as well. Repeatedly praising one child for a quality that another finds difficult may unintentionally establish a family hierarchy. Over time, siblings can begin to experience one another as competitors for recognition. We can cultivate a different atmosphere by noticing each child's particular efforts and avoiding the suggestion that one sibling supplies the standard by which the others are measured.

The different attachments of Yitzchak and Rivkah also invite us to consider how parents can support one another in seeing their children more fully. Each parent may notice qualities the other overlooks. When discussed with respect, these differences can broaden our understanding of a child. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains that the difference in Yitzchak's and Rivkah's feelings toward their sons adversely affected their upbringing. Unity and agreement between parents in education, together with equal love for all their children, are the cornerstone of successful education. Significantly, children whose conduct falls short need especially devoted love, care, consideration, and sacrifice (Hirsch, *Bereishit* 25:28). The child who challenges us most may therefore be the very one who most needs to feel our love.

One practical step is to examine how we speak about our children when they are present. Do we repeatedly describe one as the wise one and another as the difficult one? Such descriptions can become roles that leave little room for growth. Every child deserves the freedom to develop beyond the identity the family has come to expect.

We cannot force every connection to feel the same. We can, however, take responsibility for how we express our love. A thoughtful call, an attentive question, or an acknowledgment of an overlooked effort can communicate that a child occupies a distinct and irreplaceable place in our hearts. As parents, our task is to become attentive enough to recognize the particular soul Hashem has entrusted to us with each of our children.

Can Love Draw a Struggling Child Closer?

Rabbi Mordechai HaKohen's striking interpretation of the words כִּי־צַיִד בְּפִיו/*ki tzayid befiv* – 'because game was in his mouth' reveals a parental love actively seeking a way to reach a child whose conduct causes concern. He suggests that Yitzchak himself was seeking to draw Esav in through his speech. By addressing him gently and calling him his son, Yitzchak hoped to bring him back to a good path. His expressions of affection formed part of his effort to reach Esav's heart (*Siftei Kohen*, *Bereishit* 25:28).

How relevant this is when a child begins moving in a direction that troubles us. Fear can make us speak more sharply, question more insistently, and turn every encounter into a discussion of what needs to change. Yet, a gentle voice and a warm welcome may preserve the connection through which our words can eventually enter. We can distinguish between an action we know is wrong and the child we love. Even when we must firmly oppose a choice, we can continue to draw our child close. The Chida adds that Rivkah did not hate Esav, for converts would eventually emerge from him, and the goodness within him would find expression through Antoninus (Chida, *Chomat Anakh*, *Bereishit* 25:28). Even while recognizing Esav's wrongdoing, she could leave room for the good that had yet to unfold. Perhaps this is among our deepest responsibilities as parents: to see our children honestly while remaining open to possibilities beyond what is visible today. Each child needs a distinct place in our hearts, including the child whose path we find most difficult to understand.