



Leadership and Favoritism • Parshat Ki Teitzei

Many sensitive interrelationships are mentioned in the opening chapter of this week's sedra, *Ki Teitzei*. The first is the status of the captive woman who was taken in battle and captured the fancy of a soldier in that war. She was completely vulnerable and, in principle, unprotected. The Torah understood that the situation was one of natural exploitation and thus placed parameters around her care. The captive woman's hair and nails were to be trimmed, and she was to exchange her old clothes for new ones, presumably resembling those worn by other Israelite women. The exoticism associated with foreign women was to be tempered to measure whether or not the soldier had true feelings for *this* woman.

This concern was not only about externalities; it was also about the emotional weather in the relationship: "She shall spend a month's time in your household lamenting her father and mother; after that you may come to her and thus become her husband, and she shall be your wife. Then, should you no longer want her, you must release her outright..." (Deut. 21:13-14). This poor woman, ripped from the bosom of her family, no doubt suffered greatly. She was to be given time to grieve, at which time the soldier must decide if he had the patience and tenderness to commit to this woman in earnest.

If not, he was forbidden to sell her into slavery, as if she were owned by him. The way she was to

be treated is discussed in the first person, as if the reader is the one in this unenviable position. It's as if the Torah wanted us think of the emotional casualties of war, understand its complexities, and feel the captive woman's shame and loss. The case provokes us to ask if there are limits to love.

The second situation in chapter 21 of Deuteronomy brings sensitivity to bear to another human tangle not commonly experienced today. A man had two wives. He loved one, but the other was unloved. Both women had sons, but the first child born was the son of the unloved one. Here, too, love is the commodity, and here, too, love, is overshadowed by fairness: "He may not treat as first-born the son of the loved one in disregard of the son of the unloved one who is older" (Deut. 21:16).

Normally, the first son would inherit a double portion. Some believe that this is because the oldest child either had more household responsibilities within the family or would one day assume more responsibility in managing the estate than any of the other siblings. One interpretation I came across suggests that the first-born receives twice what other children inherit because parents make the most mistakes with their first-borns! In our situation, justice trumps partiality in Jewish law, even though, with our first Jewish families in Genesis, this was usually not the case. Maybe the law in the last of our five books of the Torah is there as a future

corrective. Favoritism can do permanent damage within a family dynamic.

This unfortunate reality does not stop our children and, I suspect, many other people's children from asking that fateful question: "Who's your favorite child?" Worse still is this assumption: "Your favorite is..." Current research in psychology suggests that even when parents show no visible preference for a child, children still assume a preference. Dr. Tracy Asamoah's radically titled article in *Psychology Today* states that we try as parents to cover up our partiality out of shame for the psychic costs to a child in "Why Most Parents Really Do Have a Favorite Child" (Sept. 14, 2018). She discusses many factors that lead parents not to disclose this information. The silence may be related to guilt, to the perceived damage this can do to this unfavored child/children, or to the hurt that preferential treatment may do to the family dynamic or to the favored child. She also suggests that parents explore their own feelings; in their effort to deny favoritism, they may not be examining their own biases and how these are reflected in subconscious behaviors.

Asamoah concludes that "favoritism has little to do with loving one child more. It is more about how your personality resonates with one child's personality more than the other's. Essentially, it's a question of like." One person explained it to me this way, "It's not that you have favorites. It's that you have allies." Relationships, Asamoah writes, have deep roots. Some children trigger what we might call ancient feelings and associations both positive and negative that we have with our own parents or grandparents. We might respond lovingly or apprehensively to traits in our children that mirror our own biases and preferences. Asamoah also states that our feelings for our children are 'seasonal.' Different times and situations in our lives may bring us closer or distance us from one child than another. Nevertheless, Asamoah concludes that while we might like our children differently, they must all "receive equal love and nurturance."

While favoritism can have tragic consequences in families, as the Torah and modern research suggest, it can contribute in positive and significant developments in leadership when kept in check. Those chosen or appointed for leadership roles are most often those who demonstrate a higher degree of responsibility, obligation, and drive to action than others. Their selection for leadership roles validates this and generates more leadership possibilities as leaders assume more responsibility. They then get selected for more authoritative roles. This leadership cycle of selection can create higher and higher aspirations. This, I believe, is why favoritism is a repeated trope in the families of Genesis. Genesis is not a family manual. It's a leadership manual. The same favoritism that is devastating in families can be generative in identifying and growing talent in organizational cultures.

But, as with all partiality, it must be tempered and leavened by fairness. In our Torah reading, we encounter two situations where love can be damaging rather than nurturing. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes this explicitly in *Studies in Spirituality*: "You cannot build a society on love alone. Love unites, but it also divides. It leaves the less-loved feeling abandoned, neglected, disregarded, 'hated.' It can leave in its wake strife, envy, and a vortex of violence and revenge...We must learn to love; but we must also know the limits of love, and the importance of justice-as-fairness in families and in society."

So, when has being selected had both beneficial and detrimental outcomes in your leadership?