

## Parshat Veyechi – Dec. 18, 2021

### Davar Torah by Dan Caine

In today's parasha, Jacob gives his final assessment of his sons. The assessments are poetic, but if you have to rank the brothers other than Joseph, Judah seems to come out on top. At this point, it may or may not shock us to realize that Judah is not the oldest son.

Throughout the Torah there are numerous situations where the son who comes out on top is not the oldest. And, yes, almost all of these are sons, not daughters, but that's a topic for another day.

Today, let's explore some of these examples: what they are, why they happen, and what we can learn from them.

First, what they are. Moving chronologically through, we have the following:

Isaac, Abraham's second son, is elevated. (Yes, the oldest son, Ishmael, was born of a concubine, but Sarah was obviously concerned, which may be why she had Abraham send Ishmael away.)

Next, we have Jacob, who is second by a nose, or a heel, as the case may be, but second nonetheless. God foretells that Esau will serve Jacob. [Gen. 25:24]. Jacob convinces Esau to sell his birthright. Then Rebecca sets in motion the plot that, with Jacob's participation, will deprive Esau of Isaac's blessing. So there's a doubly-potent reversal between Jacob and Esau.

Jacob, in his turn, is a stand-out performer in the elevating-youngest-child sweepstakes. He elevates no fewer than three younger children. First, of course, there is Joseph, a younger child, but first-born of a favorite wife.

Then, Jacob elevates Ephraim above Menashe, an event which the Torah describes in detail, explaining that Joseph arranges the children so that Menashe is at Jacob's right hand, and how Jacob crosses his hands so that Ephraim is blessed under Jacob's right hand.

Then, in his blessing on his deathbed, which we read this week, Jacob also elevates Judah, as we mentioned earlier, who is the youngest of his sons with Leah, saying that "your father's sons will bow to you," [Gen 49:8] which is quite reminiscent of Joseph's dreams, and puts Judah linguistically a level with Joseph.

We can look not only at children who are elevated, but it may also be instructional to look also at children who are demoted.

Cain is shunned by God, a demotion if ever there was one. But then, on his own initiative, he commits the Torah's first murder. Sadly it doesn't take the Torah many chapters from the beginning to get to murder.

Noah's middle son, Ham, exposes Noah's nakedness, and he is removed from the inheritance.

And, in this week's parasha, we have a reminder of Reuven's power-play, sleeping with Bilha, Rachel's handmaiden. One imagines that Bilha, as a handmaiden, would not have been in a position to resist advances from any sons, but particularly not the oldest son of the household, who stood to inherit and could one day be master of the household in which she lived. To add insult to injury, the event occurred right after Rachel's death, a moment of mourning for Jacob, and so it was particularly lacking in sensitivity – or perhaps that was the point.

And Jacob tricks Isaac, and, many argue, that is the reason God allows Jacob to be tricked by Lavan in turn. You could argue that Jacob is exposing his father's weakness, his blindness, and thus that Jacob's behavior is in the same category as what Ham and Reuven do.

This behavior calls forth Jacob's demotion of Reuven in today's parasha: "Unstable as water, you shall not be preeminent." [Gen 49:4]

Having observed these elevations and demotions, let's now explore why this is happening, and try to ask why the Torah is so permeated with these kinds of upsets.

Upon reflection, we might identify three reasons why the younger is moved ahead: first, a child's own good behavior. Second, because a parent somewhat arbitrarily decides to advance a child. And third, because God decides to advance a child. And in some cases, two or even all three reasons are present.

Let's look first at children who are moved ahead for their own good behavior. Judah is rewarded for finally stepping up and assuming responsibility for Benjamin's safety. Benjamin is not a full brother of his, and Judah is not even the oldest of Leah's sons, so there's plenty of reason that Judah could have hung back.

The Torah's narrative is actually not brimming over with tales of people behaving particularly well, so it's no surprise that this is the only case that pops to mind of a child being elevated because of his own good behavior.

Although, as always, I am open to being corrected during kiddush.

Next, let's look at children elevated by the parent's choice. This is our most frequent category. We have Sarah acting to have Isaac preferred. We have Rachel scheming to have Isaac bless Jacob. We have Jacob elevating Joseph because Joseph is the child of Jacob's old age (and perhaps also because he is the oldest son of favorite wife Rachel). And we have Jacob elevating

Ephraim because Jacob somehow knows that the tribe of Ephraim will be greater than that of Manasseh. Whether this is a self-fulfilling prophecy or possibly placebo effect, we do not know.

And, finally, we have children who seem to be elevated by, or with the cooperation of, God. We start with Abel, whose offering God accepts, while rejecting Cain's. This favoritism, thus unleashes the anger, or despair, that triggers Cain's fateful act.

Then we have Isaac, where God collaborates in the banishment of Ishmael. Abraham resists Sarah's request to send Ishmael away, possibly to his death, but God tells Abraham to listen to Sarah. [Gen 21:12].

With respect to Jacob, God seems to be foretelling that the younger will serve the older [Gen 25:24], but Richard Elliot Friedman points out that in the biblical Hebrew, this is ambiguous.

But in all these cases, God seems to be as much to blame as anyone for these upsets.

Having explored the instances, and why they seem to be happening, let's now see what guidance we can take from these events. We might find three things to take away:

First let's look at situation where the upset was the result of the person's own behavior. What Ham, Jacob, and Reuven have in common was their move to take advantage of a parent's weakness. The Torah finds this to be an especially grave offense, and so do we. Some of us have older parents who we could take advantage of. The Torah is saying that, when we are tempted, even very tempted, we should resist.

On the plus side, looking at Judah's late-in-life noble behavior, we can take away the inspiration that it's never too late to reform, never too late to step up and assume responsibility.

Looking at the situations where the reversal was God's choice, one thing we can take away -- and this is not going to shock any of us -- is that life can be unfair. Life is not a beach, though it can be something that sounds like that.

Looking at situations where the reversal was the parent's choice, we see the effects. Esau threatened to murder Jacob. Joseph's brothers almost killed him, then sold him into slavery.

I think we can take away from this that preferring one child over others will not be maximally conducive to warm relationships among the children. You can elevate one child over the other, and it can be a very tempting thing to do, but most likely, it will not have salutary consequences.

Scholars from the Talmudic era thought the same thing. Although not directly referencing the Torah, Tractate Shabbat [10b] includes the following admonition: Rava bar Mehasseya said that Rav Hama bar Gurya said that Rav said: A person should never distinguish one of his sons from among the other sons by giving him preferential treatment.

Finally, casting our eye overall at all these upsets, we have to conclude that our sacred text condones in general upsetting the established order, especially when it relates to unearned privilege. Birthright, blessing, inheritance: all are unearned privileges, and all are rearranged in the Torah.

In our day, some of us may consider ourselves to be members of a privileged class: maybe not first-born but perhaps first-world born. And, as long as we are doing God's work, we can find plenty of support in our sacred text for working to rearrange that order.

Shabbat shalom.