

## **Parenting from the Parsha- Parshat Toldot- “The Danger of Labeling Our Children”**

In this week’s parsha, there is plenty to talk about from a parenting perspective, but I would like to focus on one specific aspect regarding Yaakov and Eisav. Soon after the twins are born and as they grow up, the Torah lays out for us their personality:

"ויהי עשו איש יודע ציד איש שדה ויעקב איש תם יושב אהלים"

“Eisav was a man who hunts, a man of the field, and Yaakov was a simple man, who sat in the tents.”

With this passuk, the Torah outlines for us the personalities of the two brothers- Eisav defined as a boorish and coarse person who spent his time out in the fields, while Yaakov in contrast is described as simple and refined, one who studied Torah. And this sets the tone for the upcoming stories, where their distinctive personalities continue to be reflected.

What’s striking about description of Yaakov and Eisav is the very pointed and definitional way that it is written- Eisav is defined as an איש שדה and Yaakov is defined as an איש תם יושב אהלים- this is who they were, this is what defined them. While we don’t know exactly what age they were at the point of these descriptions, it is worth considering whether these very pointed labels may have impacted their self-perception and future actions.

This is something very crucial that we as parents need to think about as we raise our children. Each of our children is unique and special- and each one has unique qualities that form their personalities, both positively and negatively. It is very common for parents to label their children or put them in very specific roles- “this is my brilliant child”, “this one is my trouble maker”, “she is my responsible one”, “he is my middle child”, “she’s my musically talented one”, “he’s my athletic one”. And while it is natural to recognize and understand the tendencies and nature of each child, and also important to properly recognize both their strengths and weaknesses, we need to make sure that we don’t define our children by these traits, be them positive or negative.

When we label our child based on a specific trait or characteristic, or if we put our child into a particular role, then that often becomes the prism through which both parents view the child and how the child views himself. The more that that role is reinforced, either explicitly or implicitly, the more that penetrates the consciousness of both the parents and children, and becomes a part of that child’s personality. Depending on the trait/characteristic that is assigned to the child, the impact can be extremely challenging.

Consider a few examples:

- 1) If one child is referred to as “the troublemaker”, “my challenging one”, that description impacts the way that everyone looks at him and could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. A parent may be more inclined to blame that child for something (even unconsciously) or react disproportionately to something that child does. Other children in the family may take advantage of the perception to get away with a lot more at the expense of their sibling. And the child himself may be quicker to make trouble or be a challenge if that is what everyone expects of him.
- 2) A child is referred to as “my smart one”- again the impact this label could have on all relevant parties is greater than we thought. It could cause the parents to have unrealistic expectations of the child which could lead to quicker disappointment. It could cause resentment amongst the other siblings who may be bright as well, but consider themselves inferior to their smarter

sibling. And it could also put undue pressure on the child herself- it could be a defining factor in her self-esteem and sense of value- if everyone expects her to be the smartest, then she must feed into that perception.

- 3) Defining one child as the oldest and one as the baby- even if factually that may be the case, we have to be cognizant of how that situation defines our expectations of those children, and make sure that this reality doesn't come to define the lives of the children. Being the oldest may cause the parents to have unfair expectations of the child, and being the baby may perpetuate a certain type of spoiling or immaturity within that child.

We have to realize that every child is a complex and multi-faceted human being. Even if certain characteristics or traits become more pronounced at various times in a child's life, we have to find a way to understand and appreciate those traits without defining our child in that way.

The truth is that one of the most famous examples of a Jewish text that appears to assign labels in the way we have discussed is the Pesach Haggadah. In the middle of the Maggid section, the Haggadah refers to the 4 sons- the smart one, the wicked one, the simple one, and one who doesn't know how to ask. And while the Haggadah imparts tremendous wisdom in discussing how we are meant to relate to each of these 4 sons, the labeling of the 4 sons itself seems to counter our entire analysis.

However, I heard in the name of **Rav Avraham Shapira**, past Rosh Yeshiva Mercaz HaRav and past Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel, an incredibly poignant observation that helps to answer our question. When the Haggadah lists the 4 sons before describing each one, it lists them in the following way- "echad chacham, echad rasha..."- but that is a bit strange, shouldn't it list them as "echad chacham, *sheini* rasha.."? So Rav Shapira suggests that perhaps what the Haggadah is hinting at is that *we aren't talking about 4 different sons, but in fact we are talking about one son who acts in different ways*. All children will at times act like the chacham, or the rasha, or the tam, etc- and our challenge as an educator and parent is to be know how to respond to and relate to all the different ways that our child acts- different scenarios and actions will require different responses, and that is what the Haggadah is teaching us.

How can we accomplish this? How can we get out of the habit of assigning or reinforcing roles to our children? In their bestselling book *Siblings without Rivalry*, Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish discuss this issue in detail and make a number of great recommendations. While a complete discussion of this is beyond the scope of this medium, I did want to share a couple of suggestions that have resonated with me:

- 1) *Define the action, not the child*- if an older child often acts mean to their younger sibling, instead of saying to the older child "Why did you do that? Why are you so mean? Go say I'm sorry right now", simply say "That wasn't a nice thing that you did- please apologize"
- 2) *Treat our children not as they are, but as we hope they will become*- (quoted by Mazlish and Faber in the name of their teacher Dr. Ginott)- if a child, for example, constantly throws a fit when he/she doesn't get what she wants, rather than saying "Why do you always cry at every little thing!" we could respond with "I see that you are upset not getting what you want, but I know that you are capable and calming down all by yourself".

Parenting is certainly not an easy task. Perhaps one of the more challenging aspects is finding a balance between recognizing and cultivating or dealing with particular traits and characteristics within each child while also taking care not to let that particular aspect define our child. The more aware we are of this, the better parents we can be

Shabbat Shalom!