



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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“No Favorites on Chanukah!”

Envy is surely one of the most insidious of human emotions. It is a self-destructive emotion, because it often leads a person to act against his own best interests, as he attempts to redress the situation that caused him so much envy. It is also damaging to relationships with others and can have disastrous social effects.

Our sages include envy, along with lust and the search for glory, in their list of items that are sure “to drive a person from this world.”

That envy can lead to great national tragedy is one of the lessons of Jewish history. This week’s Torah portion describes the deterioration of a family brought about by the envy that Joseph’s brothers had toward him. This envy led to the hatred which motivated them to sell him into slavery.

Hatred between brothers, and the consequences of this hatred, is sadly at the root of Jewish history. *Sinat chinam*, unwarranted hatred, remains a stubborn problem in the ongoing story of our people.

Interestingly, the Talmud blames Jacob for the brothers’ treacherous deed, and for the future course of the history of his descendants. It comments:

“One should never favor one child over his other children, for it was the mere two shekels worth of silk, which Jacob gave to Joseph over and above that which he gave to

his other children, that caused the brothers to be envious of him, leading eventually to our forefathers’ descent into Egypt.”

The multicolored garment, with which Jacob showed special favor to his son Joseph, provoked the envy of the other brothers, and the rest is Jewish history.

Can we discern any connection between the favoritism demonstrated by Jacob, and condemned by our sages, and the festive holiday of Chanukah?

I think we can, and I share this admittedly novel idea with you, dear reader.

The central *mitzvah* of Chanukah is, of course, the lighting of candles each of the eight nights. Strictly speaking, this *mitzvah* can be fulfilled by the head of the household lighting a single candle on behalf of the entire family—*ner ish u’beito*, a candle for the master of the house on behalf of the entire household.

However, the prevalent custom is that every member of the family, every child, every boarder, and every guest kindles his or her own *menorah*. No favorites here. Everyone gets to light a *menorah*.

Can it be that this custom arose as an antidote to the tendency some parents have to play favorites among their children? Can it be that the central message of Chanukah is that all children have an equal role to play

in this holiday, and, moreover, in the very destiny of the Jewish people?

I have found no source in our literature for this interpretation. But nonetheless, it feels right to me. I personally find it dramatically significant that on the very Sabbath in which we read of how Jacob singled out Joseph from his other children, we also celebrate Chanukah and light candles in a manner in which no one child is singled out as superior, in which all have an equal share.

The lessons of Chanukah are many, and perhaps in future columns I will explore some of them with you.

But here is a novel lesson, and a very important one. Envy can wreak havoc in a family. One way for parents to avoid this poisonous emotion is by treating all their children fairly and equally, and not by playing favorites.

One of the wise sayings of Ben Sira, the Jewish sage whose work did not quite make it into the Bible, but which has much to teach us, is that "envy and wrath shorten life..."

Wise parents will take this lesson to heart and not discriminate among their children. Instead, they will learn the lesson of Chanukah and give all children an equal role in celebrating this beautiful holiday, the "festival of lights."

I would like to take this opportunity to wish everyone a Happy Chanukah! ■

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