

Primogeniture Polluted – Parashat Vayhi

I'd like to begin this morning with a little game of "poll the audience." And so, by a show of hands, please indicate if you're:

- An Only Child
- A Youngest Child
- A Middle Child
- An Oldest Child

And now for part two: Psychologists and social scientists have spent time a great deal of time studying how birth order affects personality and have developed lists of traits that are generally associated with particular places on the family tree. You're encouraged to call out for this one: which kind of sibling am I describing when I talk about someone who:

- Is Responsible, Eager to Please, Over-achieving (Oldest)
- Is Creative, Carefree, Sociable (Youngest)
- Acquires Friends Easily, Peace-Maker, Rolls with the Punches (Middle)
- Is Perfectionist, Confident, Successful in School (Only)

Now of course I am speaking in generalities and stereotypes! Most of us will not *exactly* fit the mold of whatever birth order category we're known to inhabit and some of us will be absolutely unlike those who share our same place on the family tree. And yet, there is some interesting trivia to note! All but two astronauts ever to go into outer-space were first borns (and the remaining two were onlies). August 12 has been recently dubbed National Middle Child Day, a celebration of these sometimes-

overlooked members of the family. Famous youngest children include Cameron Diaz, Stephen Colbert, and JFK. Tiger Woods, Alicia Keys, and Maria Sharapova are all onlies.

So why my interest in birth order this morning? It's true that I'm a quintessential eldest – organized, conscientious, ambitious, perfectionistic. My brother, of course, is a youngest and my Dad was too. My Mom is a middle but she has two brothers and thus has some place of distinction as the only girl and daughter. No, my concern about birth order this morning doesn't have to do with my own family of origin but rather comes from our Torah portion, *Parashat Vayhi*. Indeed, the Torah is obsessed with the very question of who comes first and what it should all mean!

Now of course issues of birth order were quite different in Biblical times. There was even a special term – primogeniture - for the distinctive rights accorded to eldest sons in both Israelite and other ancient Near Eastern societies, with seniority conferring special blessing, honor, and – most importantly – inheritance rights. We see this most poignantly in the story of Jacob and Esau in which the two boys struggle even inside the womb to be first to emerge and in which Jacob, through cunning and manipulation, ultimately defrocks Esau of both the birthright and blessing that should ultimately be his. For the Torah, birth order may not necessarily be linked to personality but it is linked to destiny - with older children laying claim to rights and responsibilities different from those of their younger siblings. To be born first is to be accorded a place of prominence.

Or is it really so? Indeed, the entire Book of Genesis is essentially about primogeniture polluted with younger children coming time and time again to depose their older siblings. Cain kills his brother, Abel, out of jealousy that God prefers the younger man's offering to the elder's. Ishmael is exiled from the family home while Isaac goes on to become one of the patriarchs of the Jewish people. Jacob, as we

have mentioned, supersedes Esau and falls in love with another younger sibling in the character of Rachel who is held in esteem far higher than that of her spurned sister Leah. For this reason, Rachel's two sons are also favored in their father's house over their 10 older brothers and Joseph even ascends to a position of prominence over all Egypt. As the story continues in the Book of Exodus, Moses is chosen over Aaron to lead the people Israel and Nadav and Abihu, a duo of eldest sons, are killed off in strange fire. Being born first may hold special privileges in ancient Near East society. For the families of the Bible, however, it seems only to foretell disappointment and disaster.

In this week's Torah portion too, *Parashat Vayhi*, birth status is reversed in the blessing that the elderly Jacob gives to his two grand-sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. One might think that Jacob would, at this point in his life, understand all too well the dangers of swapping older for younger. Since he tricked his brother out of both birthright and blessing years ago his life has been difficult indeed – misled by his father-in-law on wedding night, bereft of a beloved wife far too young and then losing a favored child as well to the courts of Egypt, betrayed by his sons who had him believe that Joseph was dead. Jacob has seen the damage that favoritism has wrought in his family of origin and amongst his wives and sons. Yet here again, it seems that he cannot help himself!

As Joseph's children are placed on Jacob's knees, the elder Manasseh on his favored right-hand side and the younger Ephraim on his left, Jacob crosses his hands so that the blessings of the two boys are swapped. Joseph notices his father's mistake and tries to step in and correct but Jacob stops him saying, "I know, my son, I know. He too shall become a people, and he too shall be great. Yet his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall be plentiful enough for nations" (Genesis 48:19). Even now when we bless our children on Friday nights we follow the path of Jacob, praying that God will

make our boys like Ephraim and Manasseh – the younger child mentioned before his older sibling. Once again, primogeniture is corrupted in the stories of our Torah!

So what are we to make from this trenchant Biblical theme, this pattern of younger children rising above? First we should note that at the time that the Torah was written the people Israel were essentially the babies of the ancient Near East. New on the scene, smaller in number than the nations that surrounded them, exiled from a land they but hoped they would one day come to inhabit, the Israelites were the weaklings of their age – especially when compared with superpowers like Egypt. In a situation such as this, it must have provided great encouragement and hope to see time and time again the younger, smaller, less powerful sibling coming to overtake the older and stronger one. It was a sign that Israel, too, would one day come to have victory over her neighbors – large and mighty as they might be.

Dr. Ismar Schorsch, former Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, makes another observation about the corrupted nature of primogeniture in the Torah when he explains that the fact that prominence is given not on the basis of birth order but rather based upon other criteria demonstrates an important fact: that character is more important than seniority when it comes to God. He writes: “The rejection of a preordained hierarchical order...approximates a more level playing field. Abraham and his clan have no claim on God’s favor other than merit. They are neither the oldest nor the most powerful of clans. They are singled out because they have a moral sensibility that graces them with the promise to envision a more just and compassionate way to conduct human affairs. Though latecomers, Israel was to become God’s firstborn on moral grounds, displacing those who preceded them chronologically, in order to establish a new beacon of virtue for humanity.”

Schorsch goes on to explain that perhaps the fact that we bless our sons by Ephraim and Manasseh is meant to express exactly this: that the order of a child's birth is actually of no consequence but it is rather what each individual chooses to do with his lot in life that is significant. He continues, "The worthiness of a human being is not predetermined, but develops as the end result of unceasing individual effort." In my words, we choose our character and our path in life rather than having it foisted upon us simply by dint of our place on the family tree.

And so we mark this week the Shabbat of *Parashat Vayhi*, the end of the Book of Genesis, the beginning of our transformation from a complicated network of extended family members into the holy nation that will begin to evolve next week. As we finish these sacred stories of sisters and brothers who violate the natural birth order of their day when it comes to inheritance, marriageability and blessing, we are reminded that we, too, will ultimately be judged not on account of seniority or size, power or place in the family; we will ultimately be judged on the strength of our character and our deeds in this world. Birth order was not ultimately determinative for our ancestors nor need it be for us. We have only to bless our sons on Friday night to remember this important fact.

Hazak, hazak v'nitchazek – Farewell to the twisty, poignant, dramatic stories of the Book of Genesis.

Sefer Shemot, here we come!

Shabbat Shalom,

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