Global Day of Jewish Learning
Curriculum—Love: Devotion, Desire and Deception

Grandma Rose’s Magic

www.theglobalday.org

A Project of the Aleph Society

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Introduction (5 minutes)

Imagine being the only one in the family to receive a Chanukah present. How would you feel and how would everyone else feel watching you unwrap the only gift?

Would it surprise you to learn that parents in the Bible played favorites? We see that Jacob loved his son Joseph more than all of his other children. The Bible also shares with us earlier in Genesis that Rebekah loved Jacob, while Isaac loved their other son, Esau. In both instances, this favoritism led to hate, which came between brothers.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines favoritism as:

- The practice of giving unfair preferential treatment to one person or group at the expense of another.

Today we are going to explore the role of favoritism in the Bible, and the relationship between too much parental love and brotherly hatred.

Part One: Jacob and Joseph—When Love Leads to Hate (25 minutes)

We all know the story of Joseph and his brothers: Joseph has dreams that he shares with his brothers, angering them because they see Joseph as pretending to be better than them. Joseph’s brothers are so mad at him that they finally throw him in a pit and sell him into slavery. Our first source takes us to the beginning of the tensions between Joseph and his brothers.

**Ask students to read the first source and answer the questions in chevruta.** Chevruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you learn together.

**Text #1: Genesis 37:2–4.** English translation adapted from JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh.

2 These then, are the generations of Jacob: At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father’s wives, Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father. 3 Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him a coat of many colors. 4 And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.
## Ask:

1. Verse 2 begins by telling us the generations of Jacob. Does it list all of Jacob’s descendants? What does that tell us about the importance of the one descendant who is named?
2. What does Jacob give Joseph?
3. Parents are not supposed to have favorites. Why do you think Jacob does?
4. Is Joseph blameless in this situation? What does the text tell us about his behavior?

While the text begins by telling us the generations of Jacob, it fails to actually list any of Jacob’s children…except one. By only mentioning Joseph, it seems clear that Jacob favors him over the rest of his children. The text tells us that Joseph is “the son of his old age” meaning that Joseph was born when Jacob was quite old. We also know that Joseph was born to Rachel, Jacob’s favorite wife. This may help us understand why Jacob favors Joseph. Yet the text also makes sure to tell us that Joseph tattled on his brothers to his father. Certainly that did not help his relationship with them.

Unfortunately, Jacob’s immense love for Joseph contributes to his other sons’ immense hatred of Joseph.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the [British] Commonwealth, discusses the symbol of Jacob’s love for his son.

### Either read the source out loud to the class or continue with chevruta learning.

**Text #2: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. “Vayeshev (5771).” Covenant and Conversation.**

Jacob gave this favoritism a visible symbol, the richly ornamented robe or coat of many colors that he had made for him. The sight of this acted as a constant provocation to the brothers. In addition there were the bad reports Joseph brought to his father about his half-brothers, the children of the handmaids.

### Ask:

1. What would motivate Jacob to give only Joseph a beautiful gift?
2. How do you think Joseph’s brothers felt?
3. How do you think Joseph felt?
4. Think back to a time when you received a treasured gift. What did you get? How did it make you feel?

The type of gift Jacob gave Joseph is also significant. When you wear a coat, it is for all to see. It isn’t something that you can tuck away quietly and enjoy. Additionally, we are told it is a coat of many colors. It is certainly meant to draw attention. Jacob gave Joseph the coat of many colors as an act of love, but it also perpetuated the brothers’ hatred of Joseph.

In Text #3, Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz explores the relationship between love and hate. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.
The Distance Between Love and Hate: A Story of Brothers (Middle School)

Read Text #3 aloud.

Text #3: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Simple Words.

The very first element in any kind of love is caring about something. There cannot be love when one does not care. The real opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. The emotions of love and hate do indeed pull in opposite directions; while love means being drawn toward the object of our emotions, hatred is pulling away from it. Yet both love and hate begin with caring. The emotion may not be constant; it may vacillate between love and hate, but the core feeling is, fundamentally, one of caring, of being involved. Only when one is involved can an emotion—positive or negative—develop.

Ask:

1. Love and hate are very strong emotions. What are two things that you love (e.g., basketball and reading) and two things that you hate (e.g., spelling tests and broccoli)?
2. According to Rabbi Steinsaltz, what is the difference between hatred and indifference?
3. Did Joseph’s brothers hate him or were they indifferent toward him?
4. Think of a time in your life that you felt hatred towards something or someone. What about a time you felt indifference? How were they different?

We are told that Joseph’s brothers hate him. Rabbi Steinsaltz reassures us that love and hate exist on the same continuum. The brothers have intense feelings for Joseph as opposed to indifference, where they would feel nothing at all. Years later, when they are reunited with Joseph, the feelings of hatred have been replaced with feelings of regret and, we hope, love.

Part Two: Rebekah and Isaac: Following Our Parents’ Lead (15 minutes)

Ask:

1. Why do you think Jacob played favorites with his sons?
2. Have you ever felt like you were someone’s favorite? What about feeling like you weren’t favored? Did that affect your relationships with those around you?

If Jacob’s childhood was any indication, we should not be all that surprised that Jacob played favorites because his parents did too. Jacob may have learned about love and favoritism from his parents, Isaac and Rebekah, in a house where there was clear favoritism.

Read Texts #4 and #5 aloud.

Note to facilitator: If your students are not familiar with the story of Esau and Jacob, you can take a few minutes to share this quick summary with them:

When Rebekah was pregnant, God told her that she would have twin boys. Back then, being the first-born came with a lot of privileges. The first-born son would normally be the son who was in charge of his other siblings. God told Rebekah that with her sons, it would be different. The older twin, God said, would serve the younger. When the twins were born, the older one was named Esau, which in Hebrew, means that he was red and hairy. The younger brother, Jacob, was named after the Hebrew word for heel, because he was born grabbing his twin brother Esau’s heel.
Rebekah and her husband Isaac picked favorites. Rebekah loved her son Jacob most, but Isaac favored Esau.

When Isaac was dying, he planned to give a special blessing to his first-born and favorite son, Esau. Rebekah decided to help Jacob trick his father so that he could get the special blessing instead. She told him that he should pretend to be his brother Esau and fool his father into giving him the blessing that was supposed to go to his older brother. When Esau learned that his blessing had been taken, and that he had been tricked, he was so furious that he wanted to kill his brother to get revenge. Rebekah, who was afraid for her younger son, told Jacob to run away before his brother could hurt him.

**Text #4: Genesis 25:27–28.**

27 And the boys grew; and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. 28 Now Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison; and Rebekah loved Jacob.

The text tells us clearly that Jacob was loved by his mother, while his twin brother, Esau, was loved by his father. In order to get a blessing from Isaac, Jacob deceives him, pretending to be his brother, Esau. This deception ultimately leads to the downfall of the entire family unit. Jacob is forced to run away from home to save himself from Esau. He never sees his parents again.

**Text #5: Genesis 27:41.** English translation adapted from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh.*

41 And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing which his father had given him, and Esau said to himself, “Let the days of mourning for my father be at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”

**Ask:**

1. What is Esau’s plan for Jacob?
2. Why does Esau plan to wait until after his father dies?

The message is complicated. Jacob listens to his mother (who favors him) and tricks his father (who favors Esau) to steal Esau’s blessing. We would have thought that Jacob would learn from this the dangers of favoritism, but we see that he does not because as a father he, too, favors one child: Joseph.

In both cases, the result of the favoritism is the same. Esau feels betrayed by his brother’s behavior and plots Jacob’s demise. With Isaac already on his deathbed, Esau plans to wait until after his father’s death to get revenge. Joseph’s brothers, seeing the coat as a symbol of Jacob’s favoritism, grow to hate Joseph and ultimately plan to get revenge as well.
The complexity revolves around the following two questions.

Discuss:

1. Can there be such a thing as too much love?
2. Must all love lead to favoritism?

With time and distance, Esau’s feelings of anger and hatred lessen and are replaced with longing to be reunited with his brother, Jacob. Ultimately, Joseph and his brothers, and Jacob and Esau, reunite and reconcile.

Conclusion: Letter from a Friend (15 minutes)

Discuss:

1. What lessons can we take away from the story of Jacob and Esau and the story of Joseph and his brothers?

Provide students with the following instructions:

Let’s explore: What can we do when we feel hate or jealousy? What would you tell a friend who is feeling this way? Would you listen to that advice if you were feeling jealous?

Imagine that you are a good childhood friend of Jacob’s. Write him a letter either right before he deceives his father, Isaac, or right before he gives Joseph the coat of many colors. Offer him advice, as a friend, to help him through a complicated moment in his life.

Ask your students to share their letters with the group.
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