Written by: Devorah Katz

Facilitator’s Note: This class can be taught in either a 60-minute or 75-minute session, depending on your time limitations. For a 60-minute session, omit the Optional Concluding Activity. For a 75-minute session, include the Optional Concluding Activity.

Introductory Activity: Your Favorite Gifts (15 minutes)

Materials needed: crayons, markers or colored pencils and paper for drawing.

Ask:

1. Do you have a favorite person? Do they know? How do you let someone know that they’re special to you?
2. Do you like getting presents? What’s your favorite gift that you’ve ever received? Who gave it to you?

Have the students draw their favorite gift and a picture of who gave it to them.

When they’ve finished drawing, ask them to share with the group their drawings and the story of their gift, in a sentence or two.

Ask:

1. Is the gift special because of who gave it to you, or is it special because of what it is?
2. Imagine being the only one in the family to receive a Chanukah present. How would you feel? How would everyone else feel watching you unwrap the only gift?

It may be surprising to learn that parents in the Bible play favorites. In the Bible there are two stories about Jacob that show us about playing favorites. We see that Jacob loved his son Joseph more than all of his other children. Jacob was the son of Rebekah and Isaac. His mother loved him best, while his father loved Jacob’s brother, Esau. In both instances, favoritism led to hate, which caused a divide between brothers.

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

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

The story of Joseph and his brothers is well known. Joseph has dreams that he shares with his brothers, angering them as they see Joseph as pretending to be better than them. Ultimately, Joseph’s brothers throw him in a pit and then sell him into slavery. Our first source takes us to the beginning of the tensions between Joseph and his brothers.

Read Texts #1 and #2 aloud.

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. What does Jacob give Joseph? Why would Jacob give only Joseph a beautiful gift?
2. How do you think Joseph’s brothers felt? How do you think Joseph felt?
3. Think back to a time when you received a treasured gift. What did you get? How did it make you feel? What happens when you get a gift but your sibling doesn’t?
4. Was it only the coat that made Joseph’s brothers hate him?

The type of gift Jacob gave Joseph is significant. When you wear a coat, it is for all to see. It isn’t something that you can tuck away quietly and enjoy. Also, 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 helped make Jacob’s other sons hate their brother Joseph even more.

Yet the text also makes sure to tell us that Joseph tattled on his brothers to their father. Certainly, that did not help his relationship with them. Unfortunately, Jacob’s immense love for Joseph leads, in part, to his other sons’ immense hatred of Joseph.

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. Parents are not supposed to have favorites. Why do you think Jacob does?

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.

Rashi, an 11th century French commentator and scholar, suggests another reason that Jacob loved Joseph the most. He uses Genesis Rabbah, a part of Midrash Aggadah, which often contains stories or legends, to help teach us about the text.
Text #2: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 37:2. English translation adapted by author to accommodate younger students.

The Bible bases the “generations of Jacob” on Joseph for many reasons: one is that, with his whole being, Jacob served Laban for Rachel (Joseph’s mother). In addition, Joseph looked like his father Jacob, and whatever happened to Jacob happened to Joseph. Jacob was hated, and Joseph was hated. Jacob’s brother Esau sought to kill him, and Joseph’s brothers sought to kill him...

Rashi suggests that there are a number of reasons why Jacob favored Joseph. Joseph was the first son of Jacob’s true love, Rachel. Jacob may also have loved Joseph because they have so much in common: They looked the same and they were both disliked by their brothers.

Ask:

1. Do you choose your friends based on what you have in common?
2. How could being friends with someone different than you be good?

Part Two: Rebekah and Isaac: Following our Parents’ Lead (10 minutes)

Would it surprise you to learn that the story of Joseph is not the only story of playing favorites in the Bible? In fact, Jacob himself was a favorite.

Ask:

1. Have you ever felt like you were someone’s favorite? What about feeling like you weren’t someone’s favorite? Did that affect your relationships with those around you?
2. How would you feel about someone else who was your teacher’s favorite, or your parents’ favorite person?

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 playing favorites from his parents, Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob grew up in a house where each parent loved a different child best. Then Jacob grew up to have a favorite child, as well.

Read the Texts #3 and #4 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 (Text #3).

When Isaac was an old man and knew he was going to die soon, 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 angry that he wanted to kill his brother to get revenge (Text #4). Rebekah, who was afraid for her younger son, told Jacob to run away before his brother could hurt him.


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 pretends to be his brother, Esau.


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 do you think Esau plans to wait until after his father, Issac, dies?
Playing Favorites: Parents’ Love and Brothers’ Hate
(Elementary School)

The message is complicated. Jacob listens to his mother (who favors him) and tricks his father (who favors Esau) to steal Esau’s blessing. This causes trouble for the whole family. Jacob is forced to run away from home to save himself from Esau. He never sees his parents again. We would have thought that Jacob would learn from this the dangers of playing favorites, but we see that he does not because, as a father, he too favors one child: Joseph.

Conclusion (10 minutes)

Ultimately, the result of the favoritism is the same. Esau feels betrayed by his brother’s behavior and plots Jacob’s death. 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 love for Joseph alone, grow to hate Joseph and ultimately plan for his death as well.

Discuss:

1. Is there such a thing as too much love?
2. Look at the pictures you drew of your favorite gift. Do you think someone is jealous of you because you got such a great present?

With time and distance, Esau’s feelings of anger and hatred gradually disappear and are replaced with longing to be reunited with his brother, Jacob. Ultimately, Joseph and his brothers, and Jacob and Esau, reunite and forgive one another.

Optional Concluding Activity: Sharing Your Love (15 minutes)

MATERIALS NEEDED
- Empty toilet paper rolls (one for every two participants)
- Assorted paint colors: red, yellow, orange (pour small amounts of paints onto paper plates)
- Thin markers
- Paper

DIRECTIONS
1. Bend the toilet paper roll into a heart shape (it is easy to do).
2. The toilet paper roll is now a heart stamp! Dip it into paint and cover your page with hearts.
3. Inside each heart, write something that you love: It can be family members, friends, activities or items.
Part One: Jacob and Joseph: When Love Leads to Hate


בראשית ל GLFW

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.

Text #2: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 37:2. English translation adapted by author to accommodate younger students.

In the Bible, the story of Jacob’s sons is based on Joseph for several reasons: one is that, with his whole being, Jacob served Laban for Rachel (Joseph’s mother). In addition, Joseph looked like his father Jacob, and whatever happened to Jacob happened to Joseph. Jacob was hated, and Joseph was hated. Jacob’s brother Esau sought to kill him, and Joseph’s brothers sought to kill him...

Part Two: Rebekah and Isaac: Following our Parents’ Lead


בראשית כה–נ

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.
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.”