



## The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

### Toldot: Middle-Child Syndrome?

Pop-psychology attributes specific characteristics to the oldest child, middle-child, youngest-child, and many of us feel that these stereotypes ring with some truth.

The topic that stands out in this week's parsha is the "*bechora*", the "birthright" or the special status of the first-born. Yaakov, the second-child is born holding Esav's heel – Rashi tells us that he is trying to pull Esav back - and his early life seems to be an attempt to usurp Esav's firstborn status: He purchases the firstborn rights from his older brother, and masquerades as his older brother to receive his father's blessing, proclaiming "I am Esav, your firstborn." Does Jacob want to be Esav, or does he just want to be first?

#### **So this should be a great discussion around the Shabbat table:**

- Does birth order matter?
- Which number child are you? Has it affected your life? How?
- Why does Yaakov want to be the "bechor" (firstborn)?
- Can a person shift his status to presume a birth ranking that is different from the biological birth-order? In other words, can Yaakov become "bechor"?

What is the firstborn? In the scene of Jacob's purchase of the Birthright, we read that "Esav spurned the Birthright." Yaakov craves what Esav has, as ironically, the birthright is a thing that Esav fails to value. What is it that Yaakov seeks, that Esav does not?

RASHI sees the firstborn as offering spiritual responsibility rather than material gain:

“SELL ME YOUR BIRTHRIGHT: Because religious worship was performed by the firstborn. ...

BEHOLD I AM ABOUT TO DIE: Said Esav, 'What is the content of this service?' Yaakov replied, 'There are numerous warnings, restrictions, penalties and even death which are connected to the correct Temple service of God'..... Esav said 'I will die as a result of it! Why do I need it? ... ESAV SPURNED THE BIRTHRIGHT ... he ridiculed the service of God."

In this reading, the firstborn serves as the family priest. It is this role that Yaakov seeks to wrest from Esav.

RAMBAN sees the firstborn as the status of family patriarch:

The firstborn was to assume the father's position as head of the family, with the requisite honor of his younger brothers. This is why he said to Isaac, 'I am Esav your firstborn', as if to say that he [Jacob] was the firstborn, fitting to be blessed."

In this reading Jacob seeks the family leadership. Esav, at his younger stage of life, sees this responsible role as too constraining. He is not seeking commitment; he comes in, eats, and leaves.

IBN EZRA views the firstborn status as accruing financial benefits:

SELL ME YOUR BIRTHRIGHT: The meaning of the term "birthright" is receiving a double portion of the father's wealth. And as for the logic of his statement: I AM AT THE POINT OF DEATH (lit. walking towards death): When hunting, Esav endangered his life, there being wild animals who might kill him. It was a clear possibility that he might die before his father."

Esav lived for the moment. His career put him in daily danger. He could not think of wealth that might benefit him after his father's death. However, as his father aged, he began to take an interest.

## THE BOOK OF GENESIS - ANTI-FIRSTBORN!

Biological birth order cannot be altered, however, the "Firstborn" as we have defined it - whether it is religious duty, familial leadership, or financial benefit – can be transferred to another sibling.

And yet, throughout Sefer Bereshit, we consistently gain an anti-firstborn impression. Here is the evidence:

- Cain is the firstborn, but Abel is preferred.
- Ishmael is Abraham's firstborn but Isaac becomes Abraham's heir and the leader of the family.
- Yaakov inherits the legacy of Isaac rather than Esav.

- Jacob's firstborn, Reuven, never succeeds in leading the clan, leaving the familial leadership to Judah or Joseph.
- Even with Joseph's children, Yaakov gives preference to Ephraim over Menashe, the firstborn.
- Moses is not the oldest nor is King David.

I would say it further. One cannot purchase a firstborn. Yaakov bought it from Esav, but still declared to Isaac: "I am Esav, your firstborn!" The sale has not been recognized! Yaakov tries to usurp the blessing, but he gains his newfound status only after he has learned to "struggle with man and God and prevail." In Bereshit, we gain our status by what we earn, by what we become; not by our birth-order.

It would seem that the Torah is telling us something through this persistent theme. This Parsha comes NOT to emphasize the role of the firstborn and the status of the birthright but rather to lower its importance. The Torah is communicating that good deeds and religious commitment will guarantee success and prestige. Birth confers no automatic rights. It is our actions that will lead a person to the greatest heights.

Shabbat Shalom!