



**JOY: Why does a pattern of unjust favoritism appear time and again in our biblical stories?**

**EDIE:** There are many different explanations. Biblical scholar Tamara Eskenazi says these biblical stories are a way of “restoring hope and providing healing to a people whose world had become undone after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 586 B.C.E. and the exile that followed.” Choosing the younger son to inherit power and position offered the disenfranchised Israelites hope; if they maintained faith, God would return them to their rightful, secure, sovereign home. Another explanation for the reversal of traditional inheritance practices is to send the message that change is possible. And that brings us to the third message: While we might strive for justice, we can learn even from being treated unfairly how to manage disappointment and hurt. By growing in empathy and self control, a legacy of greater love and maturity may be ours no matter what we are bequeathed by parents. On Jacob’s deathbed, the grown siblings in the Joseph story are challenged to use the forgiveness of one another which they achieved in their lifetime to manage this new, painful provocation differently.

That is not to say that Judaism condones the practice of purposely bestowing an unjust inheritance. Tractate Shabbat of the Babylonian Talmud (page 10b) states: “A man should never single out one son among his others, for on account of a *sela* weight of silk (the coat of many colors) that Jacob gave Joseph in excess of his other sons, his brothers became jealous of him, and the matter resulted in our forefather’s exile in Egypt.”



**JOY: Are wills sometimes reflections of parental judgment of their children?**

**DALE:** Very often wills are used as a measure of performance. The parent is sending a message, sometimes from the grave: “You did this,” or “You didn’t do that,” or “Everything was fine until you married that girl.” Sometimes—because neither the parents nor children ever wanted to broach uncomfortable subjects—it’s only when the will is read that a son or daughter discovers that one or both parents harbored such unspoken resentments.

Also, many adult children interpret the will as a kind of final report card. You know, “How did I do, in my mother’s or father’s eyes? Did I make the grade—A, B, C, D, or F?”

Sometimes having such expectation leads to a positive outcome. A woman I know knew that one of her daughters

coveted her grandmother’s diamond necklace, but this mother would never let her wear it because “she loses everything.” The matter was never discussed, but after the mother died her will specified that the necklace go to that daughter, who interpreted this decision as her mother’s way of finally validating her as a responsible adult.

But much of the time, the “report card” perspective is fraught with problems. If one sibling is chosen as executor, the others may construe this as a statement about who their parents perceived as the most competent and a judgment about their not having measured up. The situation becomes more complicated when the executor is younger than other siblings or when the chosen one lords his/her power as executor over brothers and sisters.

**EDIE:** Very often, before the will is read, a deeply alienated child who felt mistreated and may have even stopped seeing his parents may still cling to the hope that he will be rewarded with a significant inheritance as reparations for his suffering and as acknowledgment that he had been loved after all. If, it turns out, he’s bequeathed less than his siblings, he may feel betrayed by both parents and the siblings who allegedly failed to act as advocates on his behalf—an expectation that mystifies his siblings.



**ARON: To avoid fairness and validation problems, should a will simply stipulate: “Whatever I have will be divided equally”?**

**DALE:** That still doesn’t guarantee that the children will perceive the will as fair. If one sibling, usually a daughter, has been taking care of an infirm parent for years, she may expect a monetary reward, and feel hurt if the parent fails to account for her extra effort. Yet if the parent does reward the dutiful daughter with a disproportionate share, her siblings may protest: “It was her choice to take care of Mom, and doesn’t make up for a lifetime of being part of a family in which everything was always equal.”

**EDIE:** Paradoxically, the sibling who remains close to the parent often does not feel she is the favored child. A parent may take for granted the devoted daughter who visits her in the nursing home every day. Then, on that rare occasion when her brother walks in, the overjoyed mom announces, “Oh, my son is here, he visits!” The daughter may hope that such imbalance will be corrected in her inheritance, although typical patterns of family interaction tend to persist, even at the end of life.

**DALE:** If the parent expressed heartfelt appreciation for the devoted daughter in life—“Thank you, I’m so grateful you are here, having you wash my hair makes me feel