

MAKING A DEAL WITH G-D

Category: Holidays, Yom Kippur

There is always a stark difference between the treatment of the youngest and oldest in a family. How do we approach G-d? As the oldest or youngest child? The answer is that it's a trade-off.

Oldest Vs. Youngest

If it depended on you, would you have chosen to be the first-born or the youngest in your family?

Most of the people I asked told me that they would prefer being the youngest, because the first child born to young couples becomes the experimental model.

They try out all of the theories they read on how to raise children.

They're going to raise the healthiest kid ever so they're only going to give him healthy food. Almost every family is ready to tell how their first child during his first three years never put a candy into his mouth. Nebach! The parents, for as long as they can remember, have been eating candies, but the child is not allowed to because he has to grow up healthy. There's no hope for them, but he will be the cream of the crop. Whenever they put the pacifier into his mouth they wash it off with an antiseptic. G-d forbid he should catch anything. They teach him to go to sleep only in his bed. In short, they make him crazy.

There's more. The parents have high expectations of their first-born. They expect him to be the best in every way imaginable in the family, because the parents feel they have to brag and say, "...My son, the most ambitious in his class, is a genius..."

In addition, they place all of the responsibility of the family on him. His younger siblings look up to and assess him, taking him as their example. He paves the way and everyone follows. Consequently, the parents expect from him unprecedented excellence, reminding him day and night that "Your brothers and sisters imitate you and you are responsible for them making the right decisions." They expect from the first moment on that he be an adult. They always tell him, "You are

responsible for your younger siblings. You have to make sure that they don't mess up."

In contrast, the parents don't expect anything from the youngest. He's allowed to do anything he wants. He sleeps at night with his parents. He eats as much nosh as he wants. He goes out with his friends whenever he wants and comes home whenever he feels like it. His parents don't have the strength to argue with him anymore and therefore give in to him. All of their ideological dreams of raising the healthiest and most talented child on earth have dissipated a long time ago. They are experienced enough and know quite well that there's nothing to expect from children. They already have no need to brag about their child. In short, they've grown old!

It's no wonder then that everyone would like to be the youngest in the family.

In Yiddish, the youngest child is referred to as the "mazinik".

Youngests in Torah

When we look in the Torah to see who was more successful in life, the older or the younger son, we see that the younger were in fact far more successful. Take for example Avraham Avinu who had two sons, Yishmael and Yitzchak. Yishmael, the older one, became "a wild man" who was eventually thrown out of the house, whereas Yitzchak was the start of the Jewish nation.

We see a similar scenario in the next generation with Yaakov and Eisav. Eisav was the first-born and Yaakov was the younger brother. The first-born acquired a bad name, whereas the younger one received all of the sublime blessings from his father Yitzchak, bringing such prestige and honor to the family.

The same can be seen with the girls, Leah and Rachel. Leah was the older and Rachel was the younger. But Yaakov loved Rachel more.

In the next generation Yaakov had twelve sons and one daughter. Reuven was the first-born, but Yosef who was born in Yaakov's later years merits his father's love more than his other siblings, getting the legendary coat of many colors. Yosef eventually became the ruler of Egypt.

In the following generation Yosef had two sons, Menashe and Ephraim. We all

know the story when they came to receive the blessings from their grandfather Yaakov before his passing. Yaakov crisscrossed his hands and placed his right hand on the younger Ephraim's head, so that he, not his older brother Menashe was the one who merited the most important blessings.

It was that way with King David too. It's recounted in the Prophets that G-d told Shmuel the Prophet to go Bethlehem and meet a certain fellow there by the name of Yishai and his family. That's where he'll find the person that G-d chose to be the next king.

Shmuel the Prophet arrives and finds before him a festive meal prepared in his honor, but instead of sitting down to eat, he declares that he has to first carry out his mission of finding the person G-d chose as king.

Yishai calls his sons in, each one a gem in his own right. Each one excelled in school and finished college. Each one is handsome, tall, healthy and very athletic. In short, leaders from birth. The first one stands before Shmuel, and Shmuel thinks to himself that certainly this one is worthy of being king. But G-d doesn't say a word, and so the oldest one is not the right one. Then Yishai calls the second son. Still nothing. Shmuel the Prophet doesn't sense G-d's message. And so it was with the third and fourth, all the way through the seventh. Nothing happens. No message from G-d.

Then Shmuel turns to Yishai and asks, "Is that it? Are there any more boys?" Yishai responds, "Well, I have another son, my youngest—but he's out grazing the sheep." Shmuel calls for him to come in—and it was this youngest son David, the redhead with the beautiful eyes, whom G-d chose to be the next king. He became the most important and famous Jewish king of Jewish history.

So it seem like it's worth being the youngest child in the family after all!

So What Are We?

Still, after all this, we run into a problem. The Torah says that G-d calls the Jewish nation "My first-born son, Israel." We are referred to as G-d's first-born son. This means that G-d has all the expectations that parents have of their first-born child, such as being an adult upon birth, not putting the family to shame and being an example to the other children. Or, as the Torah puts it, "A light unto the nations."

And finally, we have to take responsibility for our actions. In other words, we are in trouble.

We, in contrast, want to be the little one: pampered, unconditionally accepted without expectations—the one whom everyone loves no matter what he'll do. We can also find this kind of child in the Prophets. The prophet (Hoshea ch. 11, verse 1) says, “The Jewish nation is a lad and I love him.” G-d refers to the Jewish nation as “a lad”, a young child. Similarly, the Baal Shem Tov says that G-d loves every Jew just like the love parents have for a child born to them in their later years.

So how are we to be regarded? As the oldest—or the youngest?

The Trade-Off

We can resolve this contradiction by saying that G-d can look at us either way: either as His first-born with the highest expectations as are expected from such a son, or as the youngest child.

This, my friends, is what essentially happens on Yom Kippur. We come to shul and we have a dialogue with G-d. He tells us, “My son, my first-born Israel — I expect you to take responsibility for your actions and act accordingly.” We, on the other hand, tell Him that the Jewish nation is a lad, a young child. “We want You to act towards us as a child where there are no expectations and is accepted just as he is,” we say to G-d. “We don't want to grow up; we want to remain little children.”

All of us are familiar with the concept of “measure for measure.” As we act towards G-d, G-d responds in turn. Kabbalah and Chassidus tell us, “G-d is your shadow.” He is a mirror image of our conduct. G-d reacts to us precisely the way we act toward Him. Therefore, if we want Him to accept us exactly as we are, then we also have to accept Him for what He is.

What does this mean for us?

Generally speaking, when we tell someone that he has to do a certain mitzvah, his face starts to twitch. Typical responses are, “Where is this written?”, “What's the logic behind it?”

Some people would claim that thousands of years ago it was necessary to keep kosher because people weren't aware of hygiene or the importance of cleanliness

in food, but that in today's modern world there's no need to keep kosher. They claim the same rule applies to other mitzvos—"there's just no need anymore."

But let us bear one thing in mind. If you want G-d to accept you as you are, you must accept Him as He is. No questions or arguments. Relevant or not, if G-d wants it, that's a good enough reason to do it.

The same rule of "measure for measure" also applies to such questions as where was G-d during the Holocaust or other philosophical objections. If you ask "intelligent" or "adult" questions, then G-d will treat you in kind and will expect you to act as an adult - always accountable for your actions. However, if you believe in Him completely and wholeheartedly as a child would, then G-d act towards you in like manner.

Tonight we come to shul for one essential thing—one thing that sums up everything that Yom Kippur is. We are here to make a deal with G-d: We accept You the way You are, and You, in exchange, accept us the way we are.