

My colleague in Los Angeles, Rabbi David Wolpe, recently opened a sermon with a question directed to the parents who were present in the congregation.

Actually, the question is also quite important to those people who are not parents, but who have one or more siblings.

Ultimately, I believe that even if you aren't parents, and don't have any siblings, there can be a worthwhile way to look at the question and apply it to your life as well.

Here is the question, and don't answer it, because I will give you the only answer which is true and makes sense – which is your favorite child?

I think this is an important question, and certainly an inevitable one – so inevitable that we find the issue repeatedly brought to our attention in the book of Genesis, and even in the Torah reading for these days of Rosh Hashanah.

Think about the reading for today, which announces the birth of Isaac.

What do we learn right away – that a rivalry with Ishmael, his half-brother, ensues.

There is a struggle for each to become the favorite of Abraham, if not between the boys themselves, then between their mothers.

And what about tomorrow's reading – the dramatic "binding of Isaac," when God tells Abraham, "take your son, your only son,

whom you love, *Isaac*," and place him as an offering on the altar.

Rashi points out the purposeful drama in the language here –

Kach Na et bincha - take your son (I have two sons),

Et yichidcha - your only/singular son (this one is singular to his mother, and this one is singular to his mother),

Asher ahavta - the one you love (I love both of them),

and finally, only then, does the text explicitly say et Yitzchak – Isaac.

And so if I were to ask you, which child do you *love*, your answer would be like that of Abraham – I love them both, I love them all.

But I didn't ask that question – instead I asked, which child is your favorite - and the answer to that question is – "it depends:"

Today, when I am so proud, you are my child.

Yesterday, when you refused to listen to a word I said, you are your mother's child-that behavior, that attitude, that sounds just like your mother's side of the family.

Or worse, when we say, "I don't know whose child you are?"

Even if you are not a parent, but you have one or more siblings, I know you can relate to the question of, who is the favorite

child, you, or one of your siblings, and the answer is, of course, it depends.

One reason I bring this issue to your attention today, is because on Rosh Hashanah, we all come together *as children*, as siblings, before Avinu Malkaynu - our parent, our ruler, the one who is ultimately in charge, the one who we hope will be also be Av HaRachamin - our merciful parent.

We are all God's children, and we are all created in gods image, and I wonder, dear brothers and sisters – *who among us is God's favorite?*

Not, who does God love more – we should know that God *loves* all of us, all of the time, just like we love all of our children all the time –

but, who among us is God's favorite – and the answer is – it depends!

It depends, on what we imagine pleases God, and whether what we imagine, is correct.

Take a moment to think about you and your parents, or you and your children –

some decision is made, like you decide to be a Rabbi, instead of a doctor, or some act is performed – like a three-year-old child decides to put graffiti on her bedroom wall with red nail polish, ultimately very cute to remember but not exactly endearing on that day.

Try to imagine, and understand, as you look back over your own life, in the past year, or several years, how it might be possible for God to say, "I loved you every day, but not every day were you my favorite –

but don't worry, any day you want you can be my favorite again.

God says to us, just as we always are willing to say to our children, I am ready to welcome you back – I'm ready for you to return.

Just about any parent is like God who always reaches out, and is always ready to welcome us home.

And that is why in our morning prayers we recognize God's great love –Ahava Rabba, while by the end of the day we realize that indeed his love is Ahavat Olam an eternal love.

So how do we get from receiving God's love which is eternal, to becoming one of God's favorites?

I know you know the answer to that question, at least the traditional Jewish answer – and that is to observe the mitzvot, at least the mitzvot, we are convinced that matter to God.

That is the primary program for us as Jews, and that is how we become favorite children of God.

However, not always is the official program going to work for everyone – not always do **our children** meet **our expectations**.

Sometimes they disappoint, and sometimes they exceed, our expectations.

I think all of us know that at times, we disappoint God, but we should also know that perhaps at times we can also even exceed God's expectations – we can go beyond the letter of the law.

That is why Abraham and Sarah are so special and why we read about them on these days.

The first 11 chapters of the book of Genesis are filled with failed expectations, the story of Cain and Abel (talk about favorite children – how did that work out exactly), Noah and the flood, until finally Abraham and Sarah bring to the world the incredible idea that one God and only one God made us all – that we are all brothers and sisters and that we can all become sooner or later, if we try hard enough, God's favorite.

I want to take a moment to move us to the other most Jewish time of the year – Passover.

We are at the Seder with our family, and we recite the words, Baruch HaMakom- Blessed is God who is called HaMakom – the Place, because God can be found in any place.

Perhaps, because God has a place for any of us at **God's table**, so right after this passage, we declare that the Torah can speak to four types of children.

In other words, the Torah has to be able to create a place for all of God's children:

the one who is Chacham –wise,

the rasha - difficult word, usually meaning wicked, often translated as contrary – as much as I don't want to include this reference, the reality is that there is wickedness in the world, and it is perpetrated by somebody's child, who is also God's child.

The Tam - the simple, clear, cooperative, typical child.

And, she-ayno yodayah lishol- the child who has difficulty articulating his or her thoughts, and who, because of that, has more trouble finding his or her place in our world.

The point is though, they are all there – they are all needed from the point of view of Torah – and I believe these character assignments are interchangeable – today's chacham can be tomorrow's rasha; today's she-ayno yoday-ah lishol, given the right support, can learn how to articulate questions and become tomorrow's Chacham.

In other words, the child rejected today can indeed become tomorrow's favorite.

Let me tell you a brief story of what happened once to Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, the other famous Rabbi Kushner from Massachusetts, who now lives in San Francisco.

This story comes from an experience he had with the preschool children in his synagogue.

Now that we have a preschool, perhaps you will hear similar stories from me in the future about our children.

It took place on the day when the Rabbi was showing the young children all the symbols in the sanctuary.

Time was running away from the Rabbi. He had another appointment, so he decided to tell the children, "next week, boys and girls, when we meet again, I will open these doors and show you something very special inside."

It seems that between then and the next week the children were beginning to debate and guess what exactly might be behind the special doors.

One child, thought it would be empty.

Another, thought it would hold a Jewish holy book or something.

The third, guessed, that behind the door was a brand-new car.

But one child, said to the others, "you're all wrong. When the Rabbi man opens the door you will see, there will be a giant mirror."

Up to now, in my remarks, I have been concentrating on how God, our ultimate parent, might view us as we move through

life, trying to win God's favor, just as many of us try to win the favor of our human parents.

This story, tells us that the Torah, kept in the ark, helps *us to see ourselves*, as well.

It does this despite not containing any real mirrors – and that is because that which we see reflected in a typical mirror is not the image that really matters to God.

The Talmud tells us Liba Rachman Ba-ay, the God of Rachamim – mercy – requires the heart.

Typically mirrors reflect not the internal heart, but the external body.

Most of you know that in a home where shiva is observed, the mirrors are covered, at least in the room where the prayer services are being conducted.

Why?

So people can concentrate on their hearts, internally, and not be tempted to look at their exteriors. Look around – where are the mirrors here – where they belong, in the bathrooms.

Once several years ago I officiated at a wedding, not in the synagogue, and behind me, was a full length mirror.

The bride spent the entire ceremony, posing, moving, strutting, touching her hair, while under the Chupa, and while I was talking to the couple.

Gevalt - you know me by now, and you can imagine how annoying this was to me.

Nevertheless, this little boy in preschool is right – behind the doors of the ark there might indeed be a mirror, just not a typical mirror.

It is instead a mirror of what God sees in you and me – a mirror which reflects how we might have displeased God, and how in turn we might rediscover a way to gain God's favor.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we continually open the ark, and when we look in – we see ourselves, over and over again, the parts we like, and the parts we don't like – the parts we need to keep, and the parts we need to remove.

Is there a favorite internal image that is reflective of who you are, and is that the same as the image of who you want to be?

It depends –

on you and God,

and how much distance must be traveled to get from one to the other.

Shana Tova