

Many of us may be familiar with the Stanford Marshmallow Experiment. This study was first conducted in 1972 where a child was offered a choice between one small but immediate reward, or two small rewards if they waited for a period of time. The researchers asserted that based upon the results of the experiment, those that chose to wait would have better life outcomes. Over time, however, it was discovered that this test did not take into account a number of other factors that influenced people's decisions. Their background and the trust that they had both in their parents as well as the researchers also played a role in whether they were willing to wait for the greater benefit. It is no longer assumed that just because someone can't wait for satisfaction means they won't succeed.

Many people have argued that the selling of the birthright at the beginning of this week's portion is similar to this experiment. Esau, starving and in need of food, sells the birthright to his brother, as he figures, what good is a birthright if I die of hunger. Jacob plays the long game and gains the birthright for the low price of some lentil stew. The sense is that Jacob "earned" the prize because of his cunning and Esau is somehow "less than" because he cannot see past his stomach.

What this understanding ignores is the background, needs, and personality types of each of the brothers. Some have suggested that Esau had ADHD, which would lead him to be more impulsive and his actions in today's reading are certainly consistent with this. We have learned not to overly praise Jacob's trickery nor overly penalize Esau for his impulsivity. They are both products of the environment in which they were raised. People are much more complex than we are often willing to concede.

As we reflect on a world where opportunities are not always the same and people are not always treated the same, we can learn from our ancestors' mistakes and appreciate complexity and celebrate difference. Whether it was more than 3000 years ago or 1972, old habits die hard, but we must be able to change our perceptions and presuppositions. If the creator of the Marshmallow Experiment could, so too can we.