

## One Big Happy Family?

**T**he month of Elul and the ensuing Aseret Yemei Teshuva direct our focus toward our relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu, but defining the exact nature of that relationship is complex. Throughout the liturgy of the High Holy Days and in texts about teshuva, two distinct paradigms of this relationship repeatedly emerge: that of “*avadim*,” servants to a king, and “*banim*,” children to a father.

Though these two paradigms may seem contradictory, we find ourselves embracing both. Prayers such as Avinu Malkeinu and the petition “סלח לנו מלכנו... אבינו... מחל לנו מלכנו” simultaneously express both roles. Similarly, when we sound the shofar, we invoke the

consequences of both relationships: “If we are like children, treat us as a merciful father would... And if we are like servants, then our eyes are fixed on You until You favor us, and bring forth our judgment as the light...”

The basis for viewing ourselves as Hashem’s “children” is found in the verse from Malachi (2:10), “*halo Av echad l’chulanu*” — “Have we not all one Father?” Of course, in the context of teshuva, we would prefer the warm relationship children have to a parent over the cold detachment a servant has to his King. We are taught that “*ha’av shemachal al kevodo, kevodo machul*” — that specifically, “a parent may forgo their honor” and overlook transgressions, making a forgiving



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and merciful posture possible. Even if punishment is necessary, we would prefer it to be delivered with the regretful lament of a father who had no choice but to admonish his children.<sup>1</sup>

Seeing ourselves as children of Hashem should lead to more unity and less divisiveness. The Ritva<sup>2</sup> explains that the prohibition of *lo titgodedu*,<sup>3</sup> understood to forbid factions and

discord, is rooted at the beginning of that verse which reads *banim atem LaShem Elokeichem*, You are children of Hashem, your God. Recognizing that we all share one Father and belong to a single "family" should reinforce our sense of unity and the importance of living harmoniously together.

The Chafetz Chayim echoes this idea. He writes:<sup>4</sup>

איך יוכל האדם לפעול בנפשו לשנוא את מי שהוא אהוב לה', הלא בודאי יהיה להקב"ה תרעומת עליו עבור זה.

*How can a person hate someone who is loved by God? Surely God will have a claim on him for this.*

He elaborates:

ולמשל, הנה בטבע כל אב לאהוב את בנו אהבה עזה, וכל עמל האדם אך לטובת בניו אחריו, וכשימצא אחד שיהיה שונא לבניו, הלא תהיה לו תרעומת גדולה על אותו האיש. כן הדבר בענינינו, כל מי שיש לו שנאה על חבירו, בודאי יש להקב"ה תרעומת עליו, ומי הוא האיש הסכל והפתי שירצה לשאת עליו תרעומת ה' יתברך, ומה אם תרעומת בשר ודם קשה לשאת, ומכל שכן תרעומת מלך מלכי המלכים הקב"ה שמאד מחוייבים להיזהר מזה.

*It is in nature for every father to love his son with intense love, and all man's labor is only for the benefit of his sons after him, and when he finds one who hates one of his sons, wouldn't he have a great grudge against that man? So, in our case, anyone who has a hatred for his friend must surely be punished. God will be angry with him, and who is the foolish and gullible man who would want to bear the wrath of God, blessed be He? And what if the wrath of flesh and blood is hard to bear, and even more so the wrath of the King of Kings, the Holy One, who is very much obliged to beware of it.*

How can we treat poorly those who are children of Hashem? We see from here that viewing ourselves as "children" of

Hashem not only provides reassurance about how G-d sees us, it also imposes responsibilities on how we view and treat others. Elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> the Chafetz Chayim offers a powerful parable about family and peaceability:

ולמה הדבר דומה, לאיש שבניו מסובין על שולחנו, וחלק מנות לכל אחד ואחד מבניו, וחטף אחד מיד חבירו. והלך הבן הנגזל אצל אביו ואמר לו, אבי, בקשתי מאחי שיחזיר לי חלקי ולא רצה, ואני יודע שאין רצונך שנכה איש את אחיו ואף לא נריב יחד, על כן בבקשה ממך תן לי מנה אחרת. וכשמוע אביו את הדבר נישק אותו ונתן לו מנה אחרת גדולה. ואמר לו עתה מצאת בני חן בעיני עבור מדתך הטובה. אחיך השוטה יחזיק את חלקך, והיה לסעודה אחרת אתן לך בכפלים, ולו לא אתן כלל. אבל אם הבן הנגזל לא יעשה כן, אך יריב עם אחיו, ויכו זה את זה לעיני אביו עד שיוצא בלעו מפיו, אף שהאמת עם הבן הנגזל הזה, אעפ"כ בודאי יהיה דבר זה למורת עיני אביו וישנא את שניהם יחד, באמרו, היה לך לבקש ממני מנה אחרת והייתי נותן לך ברוב שמחה, ולא להכות ולריב איש את אחיו לעיני עבור דברי הבלים כאלה.

*This is similar to a man whose sons are gathered at his table and who distributed portions to each and every one of them, and one brother snatched a portion from the hand of the other. The son who lost his portion approached the father and said, "Father, I asked my brother to give me back my share, and he refused. I know that it is not your wish that we should hit our brothers, nor should we fight, so please give me another portion." When his father heard this, he kissed him and gave him another large portion. He said to him, "You have now found favor with me because of your good character. Your foolish brother will keep your share, and if there were another feast, I would give you double, and I will not give him at all." But if instead the wronged son does not do so but quarrels with his brother, and they fight each other in front of his father, upsetting him, even though the*

*truth is with the wronged son, nevertheless, this thing will undoubtedly be to the displeasure of his father, and he will be upset with both of them, saying, "Had you asked me for another portion, I would have gladly given it to you, and not [see you] beat and fight your brother in front of me over such silly things."*

And so the Chafetz Chayim continues,

אמר להם הקב"ה לישראל בני אהובי כלום חסרתי דבר שאבקש מכם, ומה אני מבקש מכם אלא שתהיו אוהבים זה את זה ומכבדין זה לזה וכו' ולא ימצא בכם עבירה וגזל. *Hashem says to the Jewish people, "My beloved children, I lack nothing that I need to ask of you, except that you love each other, respect each other, and that there be no wrongdoing among you..."*

If we truly see ourselves as the children of G-d, then we need to see each other as siblings who have the ultimate parental Referee who can do anything to solve the problems we have between us. Our arguments are not zero-sum. G-d promises a way out if we focus on our relationship first.

This is undoubtedly a beautiful sentiment, and being considered children of Hashem offers tremendous opportunities for every Jew. However, it also comes with significant challenges. After all, family is never simple.

The Torah is replete with stories of complex family dynamics, beginning with the tragic conflict between Kayin and Hevel. Nearly every sibling relationship in the Torah involves some level of strife or rivalry. It isn't until we reach the book of Shemos that we find Aharon and Moshe, siblings who demonstrate mutual support despite their differences.<sup>6</sup> The designation of the Jewish people as "children" of Hashem implies that despite the closeness, as "siblings," we face these same challenges.

Family relationships are inherently complicated, a fact acknowledged by the halacha that disqualifies relatives from serving as witnesses in legal cases. Surprisingly, the Torah presents this law as “Fathers should not die by the hands of sons,” describing a case where one relative would incriminate another. Wouldn’t we be more concerned about family testifying falsely towards an acquittal? The *Sefer HaChinuch*<sup>7</sup> explains that, on the contrary, the suspicion of family members incriminating one another is very real:

עוד נמצא לנו תועלת אחר בדרך, כי מהיות  
הקרובים שוכנים תמיד זה אצל זה, ושיבתם  
וקימתם יחד, אי אפשר להן להנצל שלא  
יתקוטטו זה עם זה לפעמים, ואלו יאמינו  
בידותן זה על זה, אולי בכעס תמיד אלו עם  
אלו תעלה חמתם לפי שעה ויבואו לפני הדין  
ויחיבו את ראשם למלך.

*Since relatives always dwell close to each other... it is impossible for them to avoid quarreling, one with the other. And if we were to believe their testimony against one another, perhaps in their constant anger [of] one against the other, their anger would momentarily rise and they would come in front of the court and condemn their heads to the king...*

The *Sefer HaChinuch*'s insight highlights the unsettling truth that sometimes family members may be more likely to lie to the detriment of one another than in each other's defense. Family conflicts can arise from jealousy, competition for parental attention, or comparisons of success. The intimacy of shared origins and close quarters often breeds the most intense antagonism. It is particularly tragic when families become so estranged that they rarely speak, lose touch, or disappear from each other's lives entirely.

Ironically, despite their importance, acts of kindness in family life are usually not about grand gestures;

they are instead found in daily, often hidden acts of consideration, patience, and sacrifice that strengthen familial bonds. The repetitive nature of these acts, performed without expectation of reward, makes them a true expression of chesed.

R' Eliezer Papo<sup>8</sup> emphasizes the importance of chesed within the family:

וכל האמור בענין יגדל החיוב עשות חסד  
עם הוריו ועם יוצאי חלציו ועם קרוביו הקרוב  
הקרוב קודם.

*The obligation to perform kindness with one's parents, offspring, and close relatives takes precedence...*

Charity begins at home, and while proactive kindness within a family is undeniably essential, forgiveness for slights presents a unique challenge, as we have seen above and have undoubtedly experienced ourselves. The deep bonds of family relationships mean that wounds inflicted by loved ones often cut far more profoundly than those caused by others. These relationships are shaped by long histories, shared experiences, and significant expectations, making the pain of betrayal, conflict, or misunderstanding especially acute. The very intimacy that fosters great love and support within a family also creates fertile ground for resentment and hurt.

The implications of *halo Av echad l'chulanu* widens this responsibility. Have we considered what it might mean to consider that together, we are all children of the same Father? Does that attitude shape how we think or speak of other Jews? Sure, as we have seen, the opportunities of being Hashem's children are great, but we must remember that those around us are His children as well.

What can we expect of a merciful Father when we cannot bring ourselves to be

a merciful brother or a forgiving sister? Have we allowed ourselves to become strained with or estranged from family members? Do we have the right, or the gall, to expect the mercy of a father when we cannot similarly provide similar mercy or forgiveness?

While family relationships can be complex and challenging, they hold immense significance. As we use this High Holiday season to deepen our connection as children of Hashem, it's important to remember our responsibilities toward the broader family of Klal Yisrael. However, we should also recognize that the most crucial — and often most difficult — lessons and challenges of family life will likely be found within our own homes.

## Endnotes

1. מה לו לאב שהגלה את בניו (ברכות ג.)
2. Yevamot 13b.
3. Devarim 14:1.
4. *Ahavat Yisrael* ch. 4.
5. *Chafetz Chayim, Shemirat HaLashon, chelek 1, Sha'ar HaTevunah*, ch. 11.
6. See Shemot 4:13
7. Mitzvah 589
8. *Pele Yoetz*, “Chesed.”