



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Reeh: Children of God

A particular phrase caught my eye this week: “*Banim Attem La-Shem Eloheichem* - You are children of the Lord your God.”(14:1)

Please discuss:

What might the Torah mean when it talks about the Israelites as God’s children?

Interestingly, this is not the only time in Deuteronomy that the metaphor of parent and child is used by Moses. Here are the other examples:

In the wilderness, you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his child, all the way that you traveled until you came to this place. (1:31)

As a man disciplines his child, the Lord your God disciplines you. (8:5)

Children unworthy of Him— That crooked, perverse generation ... O dull and witless people; Is not He the Father who created you, fashioned you and made you endure? (32: 3-5)

... You neglected the Rock **that begot you**, forgot the God who brought you forth. The Lord saw and was vexed, and spurned **His sons and His daughters** ... **children** with no loyalty in them. (32: 18-20)

This is a fascinating idea. God is our parent and we are His children. I say this because later prophets like Hosea, Isaiah and Ezekiel like to use the metaphor of husband and wife to depict the God-Israel connection. Israel, when accused of idolatry, is depicted as an unfaithful wife, chasing after her lovers. (*)

But here is the key difference. A husband and wife, although united by covenant and intimacy, can terminate their relationship (**); but as regards parent and child, our parents will always be our parents and our children will always be our children. The relationship might be loving or perhaps strained or estranged, but it is always present.

The Talmud engages in a fascinating debate on precisely this point:

The verse: “You are the sons to the Lord your God,” indicates that only when you act like sons, and cleave to the Holy One, Blessed be He, you are called sons, but when you do not act like sons you are not called sons. This is the statement of Rabbi Yehuda.

And Rabbi Meir says: Either way you are still called sons, as it is stated: “They are foolish sons” (Jer. 4:22), and “Children with no loyalty” (Deut. 32:20) And it states: “A seed of evildoers, children who deal corruptly” (Is. 1:4) and, “And it shall come to pass that, instead of what was said to them: You are not My people, it shall be said to them: Children of the living God” (Hos. 2:1).

Rabbi Yehuda suggests that Israel’s connection with God is contingent upon Israel’s good conduct, but Rabbi Meir insists with rich reference to biblical verse, that Israel is always considered as God’s child, no matter how much Israel sins.

Some of you may be familiar with the Mishna in Avot 3:14 which proclaims the universality of all human beings, created in God’s image but also the unique connection between God and Israel.

[Rabbi Akiva] would say: Beloved is mankind, since it is created in the image [of God]. They are even more beloved because God told made them aware of this status: "for in God's image He made man."(Gen 9:6)

Beloved are Israel, since they are called children of God. They are even more beloved because God told made them aware of this status: “You are children of the Lord, your God.” (Deut 14:1)

Some of this debate, happening as it did, during the 2nd Century CE was probably a polemic against early Christians, whose theology proclaimed that the Temple’s destruction was indicative of God’s rejection of the Jewish people. Rabbi Akiva and his student Rabbi Meir insisted upon the unique parent-child bond. In this context, Israel’s punishments could be understood, as we read above, “as a man disciplines his child, the Lord your God disciplines you.”

But what does this mean for us? Rabbeinu Yona, a 13th century Spanish scholar, writes:

And you should know that these words are of great benefit ... since He revealed to us that ... God is close to us, not that a person should think that once a person acts “according to that which is straight in God’s eyes” and does not sin, that one is automatically close to him; after all, human understanding is limited and even the most perfect individual cannot gain true closeness to God. But a person should not feel that God is distant from him – for God has shown a deep love by raising the individual’s awareness that as a Jew he should never see himself as too wicked, nor too righteous.

For further study:

The context here is intriguing:

You are children of the Lord your God. You shall not gash yourselves or shave the front of your heads because of the dead. For you are a holy nation to the Lord your God: the Lord your God chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be His treasured people. (14:1)

What is the connection between the status of God’s children and the prohibition of self-injury in a context of bereavement?

Rashi

Because you are the children of the Omnipresent and it is appropriate for you to be handsome and not to be cut or have your hair torn out.

Ramban

To my mind, since you are a “holy nation” and God promises that the soul will continue after death ... it is unfitting to injure oneself or shave one’s head [in mourning], even if a person has died young. Some degree of mourning is allowed, for that is human nature, but this is the rabbinic source (Moed Katan 27b) not to engage in excessive mourning.

Shadal

Know that your God is for you like a parent and you are like his children. He is not like the gods of other nations whose worshippers feel that they have to appease the fury of their gods by afflictions and injury to the flesh, as such they would cut themselves (see I Kgs 18:28)... and when a relative died they would also flagellate themselves for they thought that God was angry ... but you are God’s children and he seeks your good, not your misfortune.

- Try to summarise these views.
- Do any of these approaches speak to you? Why/Why not?

Shabbat Shalom

(*) Rav Yoel bin-Nun once suggested that the Torah distances the husband-wife imagery because that was precisely the terms of reference of the world of idolatry. It seems to be utilized by the prophets precisely because of Israel's affinity for "Baal" which means "husband." The overlay of betrayal of a marriage and betrayal of God was too powerful a metaphor, and the prophets were quite explicit in the imagery they used. In a more positive vein, kabbala also utilizes male-female imagery.

(**) Isaiah 50:1 that was our Haftarah just last week uses the man-wife imagery of God and Israel and states that despite the Exile, God never divorced Israel: "Thus said the Lord: Where is the bill of divorce of your mother whom I dismissed?" In other words, there was separation, but never divorce.