

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Re'eh

“You are the children of the Lord your God!” It is quite a powerful statement we find in the middle of this week’s parsha. A famous Jew once claimed to be His child...literally. Are we all the children of God in this way? Is that what it means? Obviously not. But then, what does the statement mean?

Onkelos, a holy convert to the Jewish religion who is accredited with an outstanding Aramaic translation of the parsha, translates the phrase as “You are children before the Lord your God.” As you make decisions throughout your life, realize, you are a child before God. Children lack many things in life, most notably the ability to take care of themselves fully on their own. They are dependent on others for their most basic needs. We are all children before Hashem because we, too, are dependent. He is in front of us, aware of our needs, and He is tending to our needs constantly. Recognizing our dependence and His support comforts us, especially in times of loneliness.

This understanding helps to explain the continuation of the pasuk as it forbids different acts of self mutilation. Psychology teaches us that the human psyche cannot handle feeling alone or unattended, and it can result in destructive outcomes if not addressed. We need to feel the comfort of another to be strong inside ourselves. The ultimate Comforter is God, and we should feel as children being tended to by Him. Once we do, then there is no place for such destructive expressions of heavy emotions.

The Eben Ezra, one of the great Sephardic medieval commentators on the Bible, takes the pasuk for its simple meaning, “You are children of God.” However, he seems to understand it as referring to the loving relationship between a father and child, adding that Hashem’s love for us is even greater. The self-mutilation described in the continuation is a reference to our frustration with the challenges of life. The Eben Ezra understands the pasuk to be teaching us that the knowledge of Hashem’s love for us, greater even than fatherly love for an adored child, should help us feel confident in facing the future. Hashem’s great love for his children assures us that he is only doing what’s best for us.

The Sforno, an Italian scholar and physician of the 16th century, gives us additional insight into our relationship with Hashem, focusing on the parsha’s reference to self-mutilation. The Sforno says that the self-mutilation mentioned in the parsha refers to mourning the loss of a loved one.



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Many commentaries, Rashi included, explain that a person will become so upset over the loss of their loved one that it brings them to an emotional state of pain that they cannot handle and thus are tempted to hurt themselves physically. This manifests itself in what psychology calls Self Injury (SI) or Cutting, where a person is so overwhelmed with the deep hurt and painful emotions that they seek physical pain as a means to relieve their emotional turmoil.

The Sforno says, however, that “It is not appropriate to mourn too heavily over the loss of a loved one, as the greatest loved one is still there... You are ‘children to God,’ and He is your Father for all times. Therefore you should not be in too much pain and mourning on any other loved one’s death.” It is an awe inspiring statement that he is making! We are to feel close and connected to God to such an extent that the fear and suffering of death is lessened. One can and should feel so close to Hashem that one’s relationship with Him outweighs the pain and fear that only death can instill. Such closeness to Hashem is difficult to achieve, yet still within everyone’s grasp.

This statement in the Torah, of being children to Hashem, dictates to us a comfort from loneliness (Onkelos), a love that relieves our frustrations (Eben Ezra), and a relationship that overpowers the greatest of sufferings (Sforno). As we encroach upon the days of Awe, of Rosh Hashana & Yom Kippur, we should make sure to set the tone right for the new year. We want a year that inscribes a profound relationship with our Creator, a year of being His children. All over the Bay, there are classes and programs being offered by the JSN to help inspire each of us to reach our highest potential and relationship with Hashem. Each one of us should make sure to avail ourselves of the JSN classes, High Holiday Services, and programs being offered over the next upcoming weeks. And then may we all be blessed to reach the heights of feeling truly connected as children to Our Creator.

Shabbat Shalom and Good Shabbas to all!

Shabbat Shalom

