

You are children to Hashem, your G-d. (14:1)

Being children to Hashem, *banim laMakom*, demands that we live our lives on a higher standard. What may be an acceptable practice for the pagan culture in which we live is detestable for us. If many of our co-religionists would realize the depth of meaning which the concept of *banim laMakom* implies, they would change their attitude and way of life. The term *banim*, children (of), intimates that they have a Father who has expectations. Parents love their children unconditionally. Furthermore, a biological child remains so irrevocably, regardless of the child's negative actions. A child identifies with his parents; thus, one's identity is perpetually linked with his parents.

When a father is compelled to discipline his child, it is an act of love – regardless of the pain and seeming cruelty connected with this act. It is part of the role that he plays. Only someone who cares disciplines. It is not an act of vengeance, anger or even disappointment. It is an act of necessity, which is part of guiding the child to adhere to his proper path.

The *Divrei Chaim* (Horav Chaim Halberstam, zl, m'Sanz) lost a seven-year-old son, Aryeh Leibish. As he returned from the funeral, he remarked, "One is walking, and, in the course of his walk, he sustains a powerful slap in the back. Immediately, he becomes upset and is about to voice his indignation, when he turns around and notices that the individual who slapped him is none other than his best friend. Certainly, if the 'aggressor' is his friend, the act of 'aggression' is nothing of the sort. It is a love tap administered by someone who cares deeply for him. In other words, it all depends on the source of the pain: Is it friend or foe?

"I, too, received a painful 'slap' today. However, when I realized Who it was that slapped me – none other than Hashem, Who loves me so much – I accept it with love and joy." He concluded his remarks with a loud, reverberating cry of *Hodu l'Hashem Kiru biShmo, Hodu ba'amim alilosav, shiru Lo, zamru Lo*"; Give thanks to Hashem, declare His Name, make His acts known among the peoples, sing to Him, make music to Him."

When we know and acknowledge (not just pay lip service) that Hashem is the source of our slap, it is a "game changer," because we know that Hashem, our Heavenly Father, loves us.

We may never forget our unique distinction as *banim la'Makom*. Horav Shlomo, zl, m'Karlin was wont to say that the greatest sin occurs when one forgets that he is a prince – the son of the King.

The *Talmud* (Kiddushin 36a) relates a debate concerning the interpretation of the *pasuk*, *Banim atem l'Hashem Elokeichem*. Rabbi Yehudah contends that we are viewed as Hashem's children only as long as we act as such: we observe His commandments and adhere to His wishes. If we do not act as children – we lose our prestigious designation. Rabbi Meir disagrees, claiming that we are always considered sons – regardless of our behavior. (This is consistent with our earlier premise that a parent's love for a child is unconditional and irrevocable.)

The *Rashba* (*Tshuvos* 1,164,242) posits that the rule concerning *halachic* disputes is that, whenever Rabbi Yehudah disagrees with Rabbi Meir (regarding a *halachic* ruling), we abide with Rabbi Yehuda – with one exception: concerning the *banim* status of a Jew who does not observe *Torah* and *mitzvos*. We still view him as a member of Hashem's family. The *Sifrei Chassidus* suggest that this is the reason that we give *tzedakah*, charity, in the name of Rabbi Meir Baal HaNeis (because he is positioned as an advocate on behalf of all Jews – regardless of religious persuasion or level of observance).

The Talmud (*Bava Basra* 10a) quotes the evil Turnusrufus' complaint concerning the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah*, reaching out to the poor with alms and sustenance. He compared it to a king who was angered by his slave's behavior and had him cast into a dungeon with instructions that the slave neither be fed nor be given anything to drink. Imagine, if a man were to resist the king's instructions and secretly feed the slave, he certainly would be wrong. (Why then do we feed the poor? If Hashem wanted them to eat, He should not have made them poor. Obviously, such faulty logic is to be expected from the warped mind of someone who was so evil.)

Rabbi Akiva countered (Turnusrufus' argument) with an analogy of his own. Imagine a king becomes angry at his son and relegates him to spend time in a dungeon without the support of food or drink. A kind-hearted man goes and feeds the prince. Certainly, the king will not only not be angry, he will even reward him for his benevolence. "We are called the sons of Hashem" was Rabbi Akiva's response to Turnusrufus. Having affirmed *Klal Yisrael's* status as (not only the *am ha'nivchar*, chosen people, but also as) *banim laMakom*, it is prudent to document when we achieved "children" status. Indeed, we find two prominent appellations relating to *Klal Yisrael*: *Avodim*, slaves; *banim*, children. Are we both, or only one? If one – when did it change and go into effect?

In the *Maariv*, evening service, recited each night, we recite the *Emes ve'emunah*, prayer which describes our exodus from Egypt, followed by the splitting of the Red Sea and our witnessing the drowning of our Egyptian oppressors. At the commencement of the prayer, we say "and He removed His nation from their (Egypt) midst," followed by, "Who brought His children through the split parts of the Red Sea" and "When His children perceived His power." We note the transition concerning our status, from when we left Egypt as His nation, to when the sea was split, at which juncture we are referred to as His children.

The *Chasam Sofer* (*Drashos, Shevii Shel Pesach*) explains that, in Egypt, we were considered *avadim*, slaves, to Hashem, *Ki Li Bnei Yisrael avadim* (*Vayikra* 25), at which point our *z'chus*, merit, for redemption was *z'chus avos*, the merit of our Patriarchs. We had not yet demonstrated our own worthiness for redemption. When we reached the banks of the Red Sea and demonstrated our unequivocal *emunah*, faith in Hashem, however, we passed through in our own merit, our own right. At that point, we became known as *banim laMakom*. Thus, the redemption consisted of two stages: the exodus which occurred on the fifteenth of *Nissan*, at which point we became *avadim laMakom* (in the merit of our Forefathers); and *Krias Yam Suf*, the splitting of the Red Sea, which

elevated our status from slave to child. As a result of our newly acquired status, we were able to receive the Torah. The Torah is our gift from Hashem, because we are His children.

In the *Hayom ha'aras olam* prayer, recited following the blowing of the *shofar*, we supplicate Hashem both as *banim* and as *avadim*, "Today all creation is called to judgement, whether as Your children or as Your servants. If as Your children, be compassionate with us as a parent is compassionate with children. If as servants, we look to You expectantly, waiting for You to be gracious to us." The concept of *rachamim*, compassion, a term derived from *rechem*, womb, applies when the benefactor and beneficiary have a close, family-like relationship. One cannot get much closer than being carried in – and being born from – the womb. Compassion is a product of empathy which is the result of feeling such a sense of closeness that one actually senses another person's pain. Thus, we ask Hashem to be compassionate, as a Father shows mercy for his son.

Why is *rachamim*, empathy-based compassion, equated with parents and children? True empathy can be experienced only when one looks through the eyes of the beneficiary, walks his walk, shares his experiences, climbs in to his skin. Which two people are closer than parents and children? After all, *rachamim* is derived from *rechem*. That is about as close as it gets.