

## “Children of God”: Conditionally or Unconditionally?

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This past week I attended two conferences both of which addressed the same contemporary dilemma in religious life. The first, under the auspices of the Center for Modern Tora Leadership,<sup>1</sup> an organization whose purpose is to encourage young Jews by means of serious study and discussion to prepare for leadership roles within the Jewish community, explored the tension between the vectors of centralization and individualization in Jewish tradition and culture. Topics that were discussed and studied included Kashrut, Geirut, synagogue organizations, day school faculties and curricula, unique community customs and traditions, breakaway Minyanim etc. Historical perspectives were investigated with respect to tribal organizations vs. monarchies, Bamot (private altars) vs. the institution of a central Mizbeach and multiple prophets vs. a single oracular conduit for Divine Revelations. On the one hand, centralization standardizes and objectifies practice. This could be considered both a positive as well as negative development. At the same time that one can reasonably expect a sense of unity and commonality when the same types of rituals and requirements apply throughout the Jewish world or throughout a single organization or institution when centralization occurs, there is obviously going to be a concomitant decrease in personal creativity, available alternatives and the encouragement of individual initiative. Conversely, encouraging fringe and idiosyncratic approaches to Jewish observance and teaching, contributes to individuals feeling much more personally invested in what they are doing, in contrast to “one size fitting all”, but allowing and encouraging all of these variations comes at the price of a sense of overall community and consistency.<sup>2</sup>

The second conference was organized by Yeshiva University and entitled ChampionsGate V<sup>3</sup> the fifth in a series of annual gatherings of community leaders and YU personnel at a Florida resort in the interests of creating a network of lay and professional leaders who feel affinity to the University and its Hashkafa, as well as being desirous to promote modern Orthodoxy within their respective communities. I found of particular interest a symposium entitled, “Orthodoxy’s Big Tent: Where do We Put the Stakes?” A number of professionals from different parts of the Jewish world presented their personal perspectives regarding how inclusive or exclusive Modern Orthodoxy should strive to be. In essence, this is a similar question to the centralization/individualization issue raised at the earlier

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<sup>1</sup> <http://torahleadership.org/>

<sup>2</sup> The idea that people in general are not naturally susceptible to being lumped together in a single group or amenable to identical practices and behaviors, is reflected in the following Talmudic passage:

Berachot 58a

The Rabbis taught: Someone who sees a great mass of Jews, should say, “Blessed is the Wise One of the Secrets, (i.e., the Creator has brought into existence a myriad of individuals who ostensibly share common physical characteristics, but in fact vastly vary from individual to individual) for the thoughts of those are not identical, and their faces are not identical.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.yu.edu/cjf/championsgate/>

conference that I attended, i.e., what are the standards and expectations that define who is included or excluded from the rubric of present-day Modern Orthodoxy. The question particularly applies to those considered on both the left and right wing “edges” of the movement—at what point, if ever, is or should someone be considered either too liberal or too conservative to be viewed as a legitimate inhabitant of the “Big Tent”?<sup>4</sup>

R. Chaim Sabbato, in his essay on Parashat Re’eh,<sup>5</sup> presents his own perspective on the broader issue, not of who qualifies for consideration as part of a particular denomination, but rather who is even part of the Jewish people as a whole, with respect to the verse in Devarim 14:1, “You are Children of the Lord, your God...” and the accompanying Tannaitic debate in the Midrash Halacha:

Sifrei #87

R. Yehuda says: If you conduct yourself like “Children”, then you are Children; and if you do not, you are not Children.<sup>6</sup>

R. Meir says: Regardless, you are Children of the Lord, your God. And so it is written, (Hoshea 2:1) “And it will be that the number of the Children of Israel will be like the sand of the sea, and it will be that instead of saying about them, ‘You are not My People’, He will Say concerning them, ‘My Children of the Living God.’”

In effect, the debate between R. Yehuda and R. Meir concern whether someone can ever do anything that disqualifies him from membership within the Jewish people, with R. Yehuda taking the hard narrow line that it all depends upon the personal choices that an individual makes with respect to lifestyle, and R. Meir assuming the extreme inclusive position, arguing that once one is considered belonging to this nation, he can never again be excluded.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> During the course of the presentations, analogies were made to tents appearing in the Bible, Avraham’s “wall-less” tent—see Beraishit Rabba 48:9—being of particular interest. This led to one of the audience members offering the facetious but unfortunately relevant comment from the perspective of some circles, that another tent should be referenced in this discussion is that of Yael who took a tent peg and drove it through Sisero’s forehead! See Shoftim 4:21.

<sup>5</sup> Ahavat Tora, Yediot Achronot, Sifrei Chemed, Sifrei Aliyat Hagag, 2000, pp. 360-4.

<sup>6</sup> R. Sabbato notes that Meshech Chachma explains a literary basis for R. Yehuda’s stance, when one reads the verse immediately preceding Devarim 14:1—

Devarim 13:19

When you listen to the Voice of the Lord, your God, to observe all of His Commandments that I am commanding you today, to do that which is just in the Eyes of the Lord, your God.

R. Yehuda would view the relationship between 13:19 and 14:1 as conditional, i.e., if and only if you comply with 13:19 will 14:1 be the case. R. Meir might counter that 14:1 should be preceded by the unstated phrase, “And even if you don’t, nevertheless...”

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to call to mind that R. Meir’s teacher was Elisha ben Avuya, the infamous Rabbinic apostate—see Chagiga 15a-b. Did his relationship with this troubled “Rebbe” inform his view about religious renegades in general, or vice versa?

R. Sabbato then connects the disagreement between R. Yehuda and R. Meir to the latter portion of one of R. Akiva's statements recorded in Pirkei Avot that cites Devarim 14:1:

Avot 3:14

He (R. Akiva) used to say:

1) Beloved is man<sup>8</sup> because he was Created in the Image (of God). An even higher level of belovedness was made known to them when he was informed<sup>9</sup> that he had been Created in the Image, as it is said, (Beraishit 9:6) "In the Image of God He Made man."

2) Beloved is Israel because they are called, "Children vis-à-vis God." An even higher level of belovedness was made known to them as it is said, (Devarim 14:1) "You are Children to the Lord, your God."

3) Beloved is Israel because a desirable thing (the Tora) was given to them. An even higher level of belovedness was made known to them because they were given a desirable thing by which the universe was created, as it is said, (Mishlei 4:2) "Because a good acquisition did I Give to you, My Tora, do not forsake it."

The commentator points out that whereas the first two elements of R. Akiva's comment would seem to have nothing to do with free choice or particular behaviors, the third part, i.e., whether or not the people choose to live by the special thing, i.e., the Tora, that was Bestowed upon them, is certainly up to them. Furthermore, it is about the relationship between points 2 and 3 that R. Yehuda and R. Meir are possibly arguing—will the Jewish people be considered the Children of God only if they live by the Tora, the other part of how HaShem Demonstrates His Love for them (R. Yehuda, who would posit that 3) is part and parcel of 2) ), or is it sufficient for them to simply be who they are existentially, without embracing the "Good Acquisition" (R. Meir, arguing that 2) can stand alone, independent of 3) ).

A Midrash Aggada that lends additional texture to this debate appears in Shemot Rabba:

Shemot Rabba 46:4<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The term "Adam" is used, suggesting that all of humankind shares this Divine Quality, an extremely universalistic statement. In the "Boaz" section of his commentary on the Mishna, Tiferet Yisrael (Rabbi Yisrael Lifschitz, 1782-1860), the commentator rails against those who purport that the reference is exclusively to Jews. He notes the contributions that non-Jews have made to society in general (e.g., Jenner re immunization, Draka who introduced potatoes into Europe and thereby relieved the masses of starvation and Guttenberg's inventing printing) as well as what was done by them specifically on behalf of the Jews, exemplified by Reichlin's intervening and preventing the burning of the Talmud in 1502, and then asks rhetorically how it could be possible not to attribute to these individuals "the Image of God"?

<sup>9</sup> Via an explicit statement in the Bible. The idea of man being in the image of God could have never been confirmed even if it had been a reality. By providing specific documentation, those who believe in the Divinity of the Tora are provided with an unambiguous statement concerning man's essential nature, something that is to man's benefit in the sense of self-understanding and striving to be consistent with the core of his existence.

<sup>10</sup> Midrash Rabbah, Exodus, trans. By R. Dr. S.M. Lehrman, Soncino Press, London, 1983, pp. 532-4.

...Another explanation for (Yeshayahu 64:7) “But now, Oh Lord, You are our Father”: It is written, (Ibid. 26:16) “Lord, in trouble have they sought You,” i.e., when they are in trouble they seek You. It can be compared to a senator, whose sons consorted with disreputable people and who became corrupted, with the result that he stripped them and cast them off. When they found themselves in difficulties later on, they implored some notable people to plead mercy for them (from their father.) When the father asked these people, “For whom are you pleading?” they replied, “For your own children, so that you may be reconciled with them.” But he replied, “They are not my children and I do not know them, for their mother was unfaithful when she gave birth to them.” But they replied, “But surely you cannot deny them, for everyone knows they are your Children, since they look like you.”

The senator corresponds to the Holy One, Blessed Be He, and his sons are the Israelites, as it says, (Devarim 14:1) “You are the Children of the Lord, your God.” They became assimilated with idolaters and acted corruptly, for it says, (Tehillim 106:35) “But mingled themselves with the nations and learned their works.” What did he do to them? He stripped them and cast them away, as it says, (Yechezkel 23:26) “They shall also strip you of your clothes.” And also, (Yirmiyahu 15:1) “Cast them out of My Sight and let them go forth.” When they found themselves in trouble, they began to implore the prophets to plead for God’s Mercy on them, and these did so, as it says, (Yoel 2:17) “Spare Your People, Oh Lord.” When God Asked them, “For whom do you plead mercy?” and they said, “For Your own Children.” He Replied, “They are not My Children; for they are only My Children when they perform My Will, but not otherwise” (*R. Yehuda’s view*), as it says, (Hoshea 2:7)<sup>11</sup> “For their mother has played the harlot, she that conceived them has done shamefully.” Why? Because she said, “I will go after my lovers”—this refers to idol worship; and for this reason did God Say, (Ibid. 12) “And now I will Uncover her shame in the sight of her lovers”—this refers to the idols, concerning which she said, (Ibid. 7) “That give me my bread and my water.” Now the idol has eyes but cannot see, ears but cannot hear,<sup>12</sup> and since it cannot feed itself, then how can it feed others? God therefore Stripped her bare, as it says, (Ibid. 5) “Lest I Strip her naked”. The prophets then said to God, “You Say that they are not Your Children, yet by their faces it can be recognized that they are, for it says, (Yeshayahu 61:9) ‘All that see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the seed which the Lord has Blessed.’ Just as a father has mercy on his children though they have sinned, so must You have Mercy on them” (*R. Meir’s view*) as it says, “But now Oh Lord, You are our Father.”

Similarly, you find when they made the Golden Calf, and God was Vexed with them, Moshe came to placate Him, but He Renounced them saying, “They are not My

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<sup>11</sup> The recently published unfinished manuscript of Milton Steinberg, entitled The Prophet’s Wife (Behrman House, 2010) is a dramatic enactment of the troubling imagery in Hoshea.

<sup>12</sup> A parallel to Tehillim 115, one of the paragraphs of the Hallel prayer.

People”, for it says, (Shemot 32:7) “For your (Moshe’s) people<sup>13</sup> have dealt corruptly.” God then Stripped them, as it says, (Ibid. 33:6) “And the Children of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments from Mt. Chorev.” But Moshe said, “They are Your People and You Cannot Deny them,” as it says, (Ibid. 32:11) “Lord, why does Your Wrath Wax hot against Your People?” “You must become reconciled to them, because they are Your Children.” Immediately God became Reconciled, for it says, “And the Lord Repented of the evil.” And He Proved to Moshe that He had become Reconciled to them because He Returned the Decalogue to them, Saying, “Hew these two tables of stone like unto the first.”

There would seem to be an intrinsic difference between the case of the Golden Calf that serves as the conclusion of the Midrash, and subsequent flights of idolatry by the Jewish people, referred to in the earlier portion of the source. Whether God “Liked it or not” there could be no question about His Choosing the people, Taking them out of Egypt and Giving them the Tora. These were the people that He had Picked, the descendants of the Avot and Emahot with whom God had Entered into a Covenant, and while the transgression of the descendants of the Forefathers and Foremothers was extremely serious, we can understand the expectation that God would Take this band of former slaves, and Attempt to Mold them into a nation that properly represented His Values and Expectations. But once many generations pass, and God’s Intervention in the history of the people is not as overt as it had been during the Exodus, what does it mean that these individuals per force constitute His People, particularly if they have engaged extensively in idolatry? The argument that the prophets present is highly evocative when the parable and its interpretation are compared. In the parable involving the senator and his sons, the notable people, upon being confronted with the father’s essentially denying any connection with his sons, they respond:

“But surely you cannot deny them, for everyone knows they are your Children, since they look like you.”

In the parable’s application to the relationship between God and the Jews, the prophets, upon hearing such a plaint from HaShem, similarly state categorically:

“You Say that they are not Your Children, yet by their faces it can be recognized that they are, for it says, (Yeshayahu 61:9) ‘All that see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the seed which the Lord has Blessed.’

It is one thing to claim that human children bear a striking resemblance to their parents.<sup>14</sup> But if we accept RaMBaM’s insistence on HaShem’s Incorporeality,<sup>15</sup> then what could be the meaning of the Rabbinic metaphor of the Jews sharing their physiognomy with God?

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<sup>13</sup> As happens with parents, when the child does something reprehensible, one parent says to the other that it was the other’s child that has committed an offense, rather than jointly assuming responsibility.

<sup>14</sup> The resemblance between Avraham and Yitzchak was enough to silence those who suggested that in light of the many years of childlessness when Avraham and Sara were together, perhaps it had been Avimelech who had

Biblical commentators like RaDaK, Metzudat David and MaLBIM point to the manner in which the Jews dress which sets them apart as God's People.<sup>16</sup> However, unless one posits that one's clothing affects the way s/he carries himself and even influences his/her facial expressions, generally one's face is unaffected by one's clothing.

Eitz Yosef on Shemot Rabba suggests that the reference to the distinctive looks of the Jews is due to:

Their Image and their Likeness, and this is their wisdom, about which is written, (Beraishit 1:26) "And God said, 'Let us Make God in Our Image and in Our Likeness...'"

The difficulty with such an approach is the implication that the Image of God is a quality unique only to Jews,<sup>17</sup> as opposed to all humans, the latter being the implication in the Chumash—Adam from whom all subsequent human beings descend, is Created in the Image of God—as well as R. Akiva's statement cited earlier—he said that Adam, not only the offspring of Avraham, are beloved due to their being Created in the Image of God.

I would suggest that what is being referred to in the Midrash when a "resemblance" between God and the Jewish people is claimed, is not necessarily outward appearance or specific ritual behavior, but rather a general kind of deportment that is reflected in the statement in Yevamot 79a, to the effect that specific to the members of the Jewish people are the personal qualities of compassion, modesty and the impulse to carry out good deeds. It seems to me that such qualities are not just a function of one's actions, but run deep within an individual's overall makeup and reflected in their Hadrat Panim, the glory of their face. I imagine that when RaMBaM contends that individuals not evidencing such qualities are to be suspect with regard to their Jewish genealogy,<sup>18</sup> such attitudes express themselves not only in their actual interactions with their fellow man, but is even reflected in their faces.

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fathered Yitzchak—see RaShI on Beraishit 25:19. Similarly Yosef's resemblance to Yaakov, in addition to his being born by Rachel, inspired Yaakov's special fondness for him—see RaShI on 37:2.

<sup>15</sup> See Essential Principle of Faith #3 of the 13.

<sup>16</sup> Such an approach would then call to mind VaYikra Rabba 32:5 wherein the reason given for why the Jews did not assimilate in Egypt and therefore were worthy of redemption was that among other things, they did not change their dress. This becomes the embodiment of the Rabbinic gloss (Sifrei #301) on Devarim 26:5, whereby the means by which the Jews became a great nation in Egypt was by being "Metzuayim" (outstanding).

<sup>17</sup> See Tifereth Yisrael on Avot 3:14 Boaz #1 who presents a passionate argument against such a contention.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., RaMBaM, Mishna Tora, Hilchot Matnot Aniyim 10:2

A person will never become impoverished due to his giving charity, and there is nothing bad that can come about, and no damage because of charity, as it is said, "And it was that the act of charity brings about peace." Whomever exhibits compassion for others, will be the recipient of compassion, as it is said, "And compassion will be given to you and He will have Compassion for you and He will Cause you to increase." And whomever is cruel and does not act compassionately, there is cause to suspect his genealogy, because cruelty is only found among pagans, as it is said, "They are cruel and they will not have compassion." And all of Israel and whomever attaches themselves to them, they are like brothers as

So would R. Meir agree that even if the Tora was not observed, at the very least proper Middot would be required in order to be considered a member of the Big Tent? Or would he continue along the same path that was earlier outlined, and he would make no requirements and have no expectations, other than someone qualify Halachically as a member of the Jewish people, independent of his lifestyle or character? Surely the debate will rage on and perhaps will only be resolved during the Messianic period when genealogies will be clarified once and for all. Is the prospect of the resolution of this dilemma one of the primary reasons why some say, “We want Moshiach now!”?

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it is said, “You are Children to the Lord, your God.” And if one brother does not show compassion for another, who will have compassion for him? And to whom will the poor of Israel lift up their eyes? To the pagans who hate them and pursue them? Their eyes depend on no one other than their brothers.

Ibid., Hilchot Isurei Bi’ah, 19:17

All families have the status of being Halachically acceptable and it is permissible to marry into them appriori. Nevertheless, if you see two families that are constantly fighting with one another, or you see a single family that is always at the center of bitterness and conflict, or you see an individual who is constantly getting into fights with everyone and is particularly arrogant, you should suspect their genealogy and it is appropriate to distance oneself from them, because these are signs of disqualification. Similarly one who is constantly calling into question the legitimacy of others, e.g., he throws suspicions on families or individuals and says about them that they are illegitimate, we suspect that he might be illegitimate. And if he says about others that they are descendents of slaves, it is possible that he is a descendent of a slave, for everyone who casts aspersions upon others, might suffer the same disability. Similarly anyone who is excessively arrogant, perhaps he is a Givonite (see Yevamot 79b-79a) and it was said that the Givonites were not allowed to marry into the Jewish people because they were arrogant and refused to be appeased, and they did not have compassion for the members of Shaul’s family, and they did not extend kindness to the Jewish people to forgive the members of the royal family, even though they (the Givonites) originally were the recipients of kindness and were allowed to live.