



Mourning as Children of God

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There is something about our relationship with God that holds us back from unbridled grief.

That, at least, is what Parashat Re'eih seems to promise in its command not to allow grief to turn us against our own bodies:

דברים יד:א

בְּנִים אַתֶּם לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם לֹא תִתְגַּדְּדוּ וְלֹא תִשְׂמְדוּ קִרְחָה בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם לְמֵת:

Devarim 14:1

You are children of God your Lord. You shall not gash yourselves or shave between your eyes because of the dead.

Referencing what were likely widespread ancient practices of cutting oneself or, alternatively, shaving part one's head as a sign of mourning, the Torah's prohibition is preceded by a seemingly unconnected statement: you are the children of God.



The Sforno,¹ attempting to understand the connection between the two parts of the *pasuk*, argues that our enduring relationship with God tempers our grief. When we lose our human parents, we are not orphans: we still have our relationship with God, our divine parent.

ספורנו שם

שאין ראוי להראות תכלית הדאגה והצער על הקרוב המת כשנשאר קרוב נכבד ממנו במעלה ובתקות טוב לפיכך אתם בנים לה' שהוא אביכם קיים לעד אין ראוי שתדאגו ותתאבלו בתכלית על שום מת:

Sforno to Devarim 14:1

It is not appropriate to show excessive worry or pain over a dead relative when there remains a Relative more honored than them above. Therefore, “you are children of YHVH”—because God is your Father, living forever, it is not appropriate that you should worry or mourn excessively because of a death.

The Sforno believes that the pain of loss can be tempered by what we still have. Losing one's self in grief is inappropriate if one still has other strong relationships. If we truly believe God is our father, our grief when we lose other, human loved ones, will be contained.

The image of faith that the Sforno offers is attractive: for a person of faith, the human realities of grief and loss are, if not erased, at least eased.

But loss, for most of us, is not measured out on an abacus. We do not necessarily shift beads from one side to another, balancing what we have lost with what we still have. The presence of a mother does not temper the loss of a father; a brother in the throes of grief for a lost sister is not comforted by the fact that he has other siblings still living.

¹ R. Ovadiah Sforno (Italy, c.1475-c.1549).



The Sforno's intuition, however, that there is something about relationship with God as a parent that allows us to manage our grief, opens other avenues to understand the link between God and grief when we pay attention to a particular phrase in the *pasuk*: between your eyes, one of the places where the Torah instructs us to place *tefillin*.

Messekhet Shabbat offers an image of *tefillin* as markers of love and longing:²

תלמוד בבלי שבת ס:

אמר אבין בר הונא אמר רבי חמא בר גוריא: בן שיש געגועין על אביו נוטל רצועה ממנעל של ימין וקושר לו בשמאלו. אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק: וסימניך - תפילין.

Talmud Bavli Shabbat 66b

Avin bar Huna said that Rav Hama bar Gurya said: A son who has longings for his father takes a strap from the father's right shoe and ties it on his left arm. Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak says: And your sign is *tefillin*.

Commenting on Rav Hama bar Gurya's advice, Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak compares our wearing of *tefillin* to a child who, overcome with longing for his absent father, takes a shoelace from his father's shoe and ties it around his own arm. While the image of the shoelace may be unfamiliar, the phenomenon the story describes is not: it is the story of a child who insists on wearing his mother's sweatshirt to bed when her mother is away for work, or of the adult daughter who wears her dead father's watch every Shabbat. It is a way of retaining relationship even as we experience the grief of separation. It is a way to remind ourselves that absence does not preclude love.

² I am grateful to R. Jason Rubenstein for teaching me this *gemara*, as well as so much of the most moving, beautiful Torah I have had the privilege to learn. See this piece for R. Rubenstein's reflections on *tefillin* and loss: <https://publicseminar.org/essays/memorys-fragile-thread/>.



Like the father in the story, our Father often feels absent. Like the child, we take something that belongs to Him—the paragraphs of the Torah contained within the *tefillin* boxes—and bind them to our arms. Like the child, perhaps, we are comforted by this reminder of our Father’s love for us even as we grieve his absence. Day after day, as we place *tefillin* on our arms and our heads, we learn how to maintain a relationship with Someone who is both deeply present and absent, Someone we love and cannot see or touch or hold. And in learning how to love God in His absence, we learn how to love our dead as well.³

This, perhaps, is the connection between being children of God and the prohibition against marking our bodies in grief by gashing ourselves between our eyes. *Tefillin*, with its similar placement “between our eyes” is a sign of love in absence, both paralleling and offering an alternative to the bodily markings proscribed by the Torah. Placed in the same bodily location that someone in the ancient world might have placed a scar, *tefillin* testify both to the loss and longing that might bring someone to mark their body in such a way, and to the possibility of connection within that pain.

Tefillin are simultaneous markers of presence and absence. Literal black boxes, to the untrained eye, *tefillin* might initially appear to be containers of emptiness. Like a shaved head or a gash, both of which are created by removing something, whether hair or a piece of skin, *tefillin* initially appear to be indicators of absence—absence of color, light, or contents—rather than as objects of presence themselves.

³ I am indebted to R. Akiva Mattenson for his teachings on the parallels between how we relate to God and those we lost. For more on God, grief, and absence, see R. Mattenson’s “Out Beyond the Sea: A Theology of Divine Absence,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/out-beyond-sea>.



To someone who knows, though—someone who understands the contents of *tefillin*,⁴ and the relationship with God to which those contents testify—those black boxes, bound to our bodies, shift. They become scars that dance between distance and connection. Like the shoelace the child binds to his arm, *tefillin* testify to a relationship that contains absence and connection at the same time.

A relationship with a Divine Father cannot replace one with a father of flesh and blood. God's embrace cannot replace a hug from a person we will never touch again in this lifetime.

But a relationship with God can be a training ground that teaches us that relationship transcends loss and that love can also be found in longing. And through that training, we may come to learn that just as we are still children of God despite His distance and what can feel like absence, we can still be, even in death, the children of our human parents as well.

⁴ *Tefillin* contain four chapters from the Torah, each of which reference *tefillin*: Shemot 13:1-10, 13:11-16, Devarim 6:4-9, and 11:13-21. Each of these sections concern relationship with God, with Devarim 6 specifically discussing love of God.

