Is God our Mother?

Moshe Taragin

The Talmud in Berakhot sternly warns against invoking Divine compassion by referencing “the compassion He shows to the mother bird,” who is sent away before her chicks are taken. Such an appeal is immediately silenced.

Ironically, this warning implicitly acknowledges that maternal compassion is the core of this commandment. To undermine this love by separating babies from their mothers is deeply immoral. Although we do not invoke this commandment in our prayers, the commandment itself reflects the profound power of maternal love.

A mother’s love is a powerful force, marked by intense devotion and sacrifice. Her affection is not a mere obligation but an overwhelming, unconditional love that entirely embraces a helpless infant. A mother is driven to selflessness by an instinctive love and an unspoken inner compulsion. Maternal empathy for a child’s pain is deep and intimate, offering a solace which transcends words.

Sensitivity to a mother bird shapes our own heart to mirror the boundless, nurturing love of a mother bird. Maternal love is so innate that it is encoded into the natural kingdom. This form of mercy transcends mere physical care and embodies an emotional refuge, a source of wisdom, and a protective shield.

It is an embrace that not only meets immediate needs but also fosters an environment where a child can flourish, sheltered in a cocoon of unwavering love and understanding.

**Father in Heaven**

We often envision Hashem as a Father figure in Heaven. Over the coming month, we will repeatedly recite the list of *Avinu Malkeinu* – our Father, our King – in which we implore Hashem, our Father in Heaven, for His grace.

When Hashem revealed Himself to us in Egypt, He did so as a Father, instructing Moses to demand that Pharaoh release His firstborn child. Before his own death, Moshe implores a disobedient nation: “Is He not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?” Father figures provide us with physical protection, wisdom, and stability, embodying the roles of guide and guardian.

While the image of motherhood is less commonly used as a metaphor, there is a poignant exception: the Land of Israel is depicted as a mother. King David envisions the Jewish people’s return from the depths of exile as the euphoric return of children to their mother (Tehillim 113:9): “Moshivi akeret habayit, eim habanim semeicha ‒ He grants the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children.”

This portrayal of the Land of Israel as a nurturing mother underscores that the land provides not only a physical home but also a deep sense of belonging and emotional refuge.

**Is Hashem Also Our Mother?**

Though Hashem is most often compared to a Father, there is a singular moment (Tehillim 131) when David Hamelekh likens Him to a mother. In his quest for inner peace and tranquility, David acknowledges: “I have composed and quieted my soul; like a weaned child rests against his mother, my soul is like a weaned child within me.”

A baby, in its pure dependence, doesn’t even have the self-awareness to recognize its own danger. It simply seeks comfort, warmth, and attention.

As my Rebbe, Harav Aharon Lichtenstein described it: “What does the suckling infant think while in his mother’s embrace? Does he regard her as the one who will save him from crisis?… First of all, he turns to his mother because he wants to be close to her. At that moment, he is not preoccupied with future plans, nor is he anticipating the fulfillment of visions or promises. He knows only one thing: the world is a cold, frightening place, but here with his mother, there is warmth and security! The mother, in turn, caresses him and comforts him. Over and above any response on her part, simply being in her presence gives him life and strength.

“Therefore, the suckling cleaves to her... not out of readiness to sacrifice himself for her, but rather because nothing in the world can separate him from her. Wherever she turns, he is at her side, tightly clutching her skirt with his small fingers.”

In our current fallen state, we yearn for Hashem not only as a Father in Heaven but also as our Mother in Heaven. Our nation is mired in a quagmire of challenges, surrounded by enemies and enveloped in grief. Every decision we make is fraught with complexity, carrying profound implications for our security, morale, and unity. We are lost in uncertainty, unsure even of what to wish for.

THIS YEAR, as we approach Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we turn to Hashem with a plea for maternal comfort and guidance. We seek not only the strength and justice of a father but the nurturing and embrace of a mother, for Him to envelop us in warmth and security, much like a mother cradles her child.

Yeshayahu (chapter 54) also portrays Hashem as a tender and reassuring mother, but with a different emphasis. In the depths of despair and confusion, when we feel forsaken, Hashem, our nurturing Mother, assures us that He has not forgotten us. “Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you.”

This divine assurance underscores that Hashem's commitment to His people is unwavering and eternal, surpassing even the profound loyalty of a mother. Abandoning a child is akin to abandoning a part of oneself, an inconceivable act of self-neglect. Isaiah reminds us that even when we feel most forsaken throughout history, Hashem remains our nurturing Mother. Just as a mother’s love is inseparable from her essence, so too is God’s unwavering loyalty to us.

Over the past year, there have been moments when we felt abandoned or forgotten. On Oct. 7, for six harrowing hours, it was difficult to discern Hashem’s care for His people amidst the chaos and suffering.

As we approach the Yamim Noraim, we turn to Hashem to envelop us with the nurturing compassion of a mother – steadfast and unyielding. We pray that He will not abandon us any longer but will surround us with His protective, maternal care, guiding us through our trials and restoring our hope and strength.

**Modern Rachels**

We are blessed with remarkable examples of powerful and courageous mothers who embody the maternal love we seek from Hashem. Over the past year, we have seen the unyielding heroism and dedication of mothers of hostages, who, despite their inability to physically shield their children, fought fiercely to protect them from harm. Tragically, not every child returned home.

The Jewish world and beyond were profoundly touched by Rachel Goldberg-Polin's nobility, dignity, and the boundless love she showed for son Hersh, zt”l. The news of his loss broke our hearts, and her heartfelt words at his funeral deeply resonated, capturing the very essence of maternal love.

Reflecting on her strength and compassion, I am reminded of another Rachel who also exemplified the profound love of a mother. Ten years ago this summer, we endured the trauma of the three kidnapped boys. Racheli Frankel, mother of Naftali, one of the kidnapped boys, showed remarkable resilience and devotion as she sought his release. Despite the overwhelming circumstances, her unwavering hope and steadfast support for her son highlighted the profound strength and compassion of a mother’s love.

As we seek Hashem’s nurturing compassion, let us pray that He shows us the same love that these remarkable mothers exhibited for their children. May there be no more Rachels who weep – and may no Jew, by any name, experience the sorrow of mourning.

Swords of Iron | Day 333