Try ignoring your wife for a week. She won't let you. Try ignoring your husband, your children, your friends - it's not possible. You depend on each other, your lives are intertwined.

How about trying to ignore your parents? Not only is it possible - it often feels right and necessary. After all, they let you do it. They encourage you to. They even seem to want you to. For twenty years they tell you: “When you'll be older, you'll need to do this on your own;” and: “When you're all grown up, you'll do it your way.” And if you don't, they’re disappointed in you. “It's about time you stood on your own two feet,” they say.

But when you don't do things their way, they get upset. It takes a while for us to figure out that our parents want us to lead independent lives and to make our own, independent choices - but they want us to, independently, choose to do things their way.

It's not easy being a child.

And yet…it’s great to be a kid. There is the freedom, a whole life ahead, and youthful enthusiasm. It is, indeed, great to be a kid. It is helpful to occasionally embrace our inner child. Like today.

You are children of the Lord, your God ... (יַעֲנָ הַמַּעֲשֵׂ לָּךְ בְּהוֹדֵךְ) Talk about high expectations. We can understand why Jewish mothers demand so much. They are just imitating God!

How exactly are we to understand being God’s children? There are three advantages.

1) Being God’s child is unconditional.

It is not easy to break the bond between a parent and child. Take the following example. A terrible crime is committed. There is public outrage. One woman says, “If they catch the animal who did this, they should tie him up alive and burn him. Even the electric chair would be too good for him because he's not going to suffer that much.” A man is arrested, tried, and convicted. It turns out it is this woman’s son. All of a sudden, everything is different and she changes her tone. “If my son is found guilty and sentenced to the death penalty, I could forgive him, but it would be hard.”

Being children of Hashem may be viewed similarly. The Talmud (Kiddushin 36a) teaches:

\[ \text{תְּנַא}, \text{ר’ יחיהו אביר, בְּנֵי אָבֹתֶךָ לְאַלְדוֹכֶם - בְּמהַ שָּׁאַתְּהַ שְׁאָתְוֶהָ מְנַהֲגַ בִּין אָבֹתֶךָ בְּכִי בְּכִי שְׁאָתְוֶהָ בִּין.} \]

Rabbi Yehudah understands the relationship as being linked to our behavior. Rabbi Meir, on the other hand, takes a more sympathetic approach and sees it as being without exception. The law follows Rabbi Meir. The Jewish people, are called “God's children” regardless of their behavior.

A child is a child – in good times and bad, no matter the behavior. All Jews are always God’s children.
2) Being God’s child comes with responsibility.

Children carry the burden of responsibility from their parents. How many times have we heard the expression, “How can so-and-so’s child do that?” It is not a bad thing. It generates expectations and builds character. Being children of God is no exception. Except in our case, when we do the wrong things, it is much worse than tongues clicking in disapproval. It is called Chilul Hashem.

For example: “Three Rabbis named in Three Separate Conspiracy Charges.” “Two Rabbis and their two assistants… charged with violations.” “Rabbi to be indicted [for]… defrauding the Government.”

Sound familiar at all? These passages all appeared in The New York Times during an embarrassing 12-month period in 1926 and 1927. It was not money laundering or tax fraud that ensnared rabbis back then. Instead, these alleged crimes all stemmed from violations of the National Prohibition Act. The rabbis charged with the crimes- overwhelmingly Orthodox - were caught distributing wine illegally.

It goes without saying that, as Jews, we have an obligation to follow the Torah and mitzvoth, but we have the added responsibility of representing God in this world. When Jews sin, people notice, and it reflects on all of us, tarnishing our collective reputation. This concept is above and beyond any specific rule or law. It is a more fundamental mode of behavior.

Then the Torah says, “Banim atem la-Hashem Elokeichem – You are the children of the Lord.” When we operate yashar, then, and only then, do we bring honor and glory to God as His children.

What exactly does it mean to operate as a yashar? At its core, being a yashar means to always act in accordance with what is expected of a Jew – even if it is not required.

There is a story in the Talmud about Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach who lived during the second Temple period and was the President of the Sanhedrin, the Rabbinic high court. He bought a donkey from a non-Jewish fellow and was riding back to Jerusalem when one of his students found a rare and valuable gem in one of the saddlebags. Halfway to Jerusalem, Rabbi Shimon, without thinking twice, immediately turned the donkey around and headed back to find the original owner of the donkey. “But you bought the donkey with the saddlebags!” exclaimed one of his students. “Isn’t anything found in them rightfully yours?” “I paid for a donkey”, replied Rabbi Shimon, “I did not pay for such a valuable gem.”

After journeying back to their point of origin and restoring the priceless gem to its original owner, the non-Jew, clearly overcome by Rabbi Shimon's integrity, exclaimed: “Blessed is the God of Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach!”

There can be a halakhic analysis of Rabbi Shimon’s behavior, but the yashar thing to do is clear. The yashar thing to do is to behave in a way that brings honor to ourselves and our Father in heaven. To seek out ways to do the right, yashar thing – even if it there is no religious obligation. This is what allows God to be proud of us as His children.
Although our status as children is a fundamental part of who we are and can never be lost, we must never lose sight that to proudly be called banim, we must act like yesharim. Failing to do so reflects poorly upon our people and makes our Father look bad.

3) In addition to being unconditional and coming with responsibility, being God’s child is comforting.

I think this is expressed most beautifully in the practice of blessing the children on Friday night. I, like so many others, love this custom. When I have adult guests – or at a Beginners Dinner, I always comment that we are all children – some of us may still act like we are. In any event, we are all deserving of blessing – no matter how old we are. When I visit my parents, my children laugh when my father gives me a beracha. They think it is funny that “Abba” is someone’s child. But being a child lasts a lifetime. Whether it is a visit home to the old room or the memories we maintain long after we can still visit home, being a child – or being reminded of being a child – is a most comforting feeling.

The same is true of being God’s children. The words banim atem precede lo titgodedu v’lo tasimu karchah bein eineichem la-meat. This is the prohibition against making gashes on our bodies or making a bald area in between our eyes in response to the news of the death of a loved one. Moshe here warns Benei Yisrael to refrain from the pagan practice of physically mutilating oneself or shaving one’s hair in response to personal tragedy. What is the connection between our being God’s children and the admonition against such a response to death?

Rabbi Ovadya Seforno explains that our being children of Hashem is meant to provide comfort in the face of the loss of a loved one. Moshe instructs the people not to display hopelessness and despair in the face of tragedy. As children of God, our father will always be there to comfort us.

Maimonides finds additional comfort in these words. In describing the importance of the mitzvah of tzedakah (Matenot Aniyim 10:2), the Rambam writes:


All Israel and those who join them are like brothers, as it says, “You are children of the Lord your God.” And if a brother does not have compassion for a brother, who will have compassion for him?

According to the Rambam, if we are all children of the Lord, then we are all brothers and sisters. Our Father provides comfort and stability in times of difficulty and despair. So do our siblings. The knowledge that each Jew belongs to a single “family,” provides comfort during periods of stress and hardship. Just as family members can turn to one another for financial, emotional or logistical assistance, all members of Am Yisrael are able to turn to God and each other during difficult times.

Think about the last 45 days in Israel. There have been, thank God, many miracles, but also, sadly, a lot of pain. Throughout Operation Protective Edge, Israelis – and Jews throughout the world – have found comfort. Comfort through prayer and strength, and comfort through each other. The outpouring of emotion and support has been palpable. I saw with my own eyes how wounded soldiers and bereaved families found comfort in the physical presence of strangers and friends alike as well as through the gestures and support received virtually from afar.

A child is never alone. A Jew is never alone.
There are distinct advantages in being God’s children. It is a status that can never be taken away even as it comes with significant responsibility. Being God’s children also provides strength and comfort in difficult times. As we approach this High Holiday season, a time for connecting with our Father in heaven, we should reflect on how we can be better children – and a better family - and bring glory to our Father, each other, and the entire world.