

Deuteronomy 14:1-2

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The Israelites are commanded not to cut themselves nor shave their forehead when mourning because they are a holy people to the LORD who chooses them to be His treasured possession.

Moses opened this chapter by reminding the Israelites of their unique relationship with their Suzerain (Ruler) God. He said to them, *You are the sons of the LORD your God.* The relationship between the LORD and the Israelites is expressed in a language reminiscent of a human family. Being referred to as *the sons of the LORD* implies that the LORD is their father and because of this they have a special relationship with Him. In other words, the Israelites are family. The Suzerain God has adopted them as His own children and thus He is their father as well as their *God*. As such, Israel's life was not to reflect the life of the surrounding nations. Rather, Israel's life was to be in accordance with the requirements of their father Yahweh. A good father knows what is best for his children, and will lead them accordingly. This reminder makes it clear that these instructions are intended for their good. But God does not coerce. He makes the consequences clear, but maintains a fatherly relationship.

On the basis of this relationship, Moses issued a twofold command to Israel. The first command states: *you shall not cut yourselves*. The verb "to cut oneself" (Hebrew "gādad") means to make incisions on oneself. Here, it refers to ritual cutting. This practice was prevalent in the Ancient Near East, especially in the land of Canaan, where people would cut themselves to manipulate the gods to make them act in their favor. For instance, the book of 1 Kings tells us that the Canaanite prophets tried to manipulate the Canaanite god when they *called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, 'O Baal, answer us'* (1 Kings 18:26). But because there was no answer from Baal, the pagan prophets then *cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them* (1 Kings 18:28).

This cutting was done to implore the favor and sympathy of Baal to make him act in their favor. That is not appropriate for a healthy father/child relationship. The father does not want the children to harm themselves. And the father is above being manipulated. To treat God as though He can be coerced into

doing their will is to treat Him like an idol. And God wishes good upon His children, not self-inflicted harm.

In the remaining part of the verse, Moses told them that they were not to *shave their forehead for the sake of the dead*. The Hebrew text literally reads, “you shall not make a baldness between your eyes for the dead.” To shave the forehead meant to remove the hair in the front of the head. This shaving of the forehead was also a common Ancient Near Eastern pagan practice for people who mourned the death of a loved one. The general belief was that the shadows of the deceased watched those who mourned to make sure they lamented enough for him/her. Thus, the bereaved would make a baldness to show to the dead person that they cared for him/her. This pagan practice perpetrates a false notion of life after death that God wanted His children to avoid.

The practice of cutting the body and shaving the forehead were prohibited in Israel ([Leviticus 21:5](#)) not only because of pagan associations but also because the Israelites were to be consecrated to their Suzerain God. Moses told them that they were *a holy people to the LORD your God*. The term “holy” refers to that which is set apart for a specific purpose. God called Israel to live in a manner where they loved one another as they loved themselves. This would separate them from the ordinary way of living. Any community where every person cared for others in such a way would be a great place to live. Israel has a spiritual Father who desires the best for them. The Israelites were holy (separate) because a holy Suzerain God chose them as His vassals (servants) and set them apart for His special purpose. That purpose included being a priest (mediator) to other nations, to show them a better way to live. A way of loving rather than exploiting one another.

In addition to Israel being set apart to the LORD, Moses stated that *the LORD has chosen* them as *His own possession*. The term translated as *own possession* is the Hebrew word “següllā.” This term often refers to a valued property and was sometimes used to refer to the treasure of kings, as in [1 Chron. 29:3](#). Here, it is used for God’s people (Israel), describing them as people who belong exclusively to God, chosen *out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth*.

This verse repeats what the LORD had told them many years earlier, just after their deliverance from Egypt. In [Exodus 19:4 – 6](#), the LORD called the Israelites His own possession. God made this choice because He loved them. Now that the choice was made, God was directing His children into the path of their greatest blessing. If they would obey what the LORD said and comply

with the stipulations of the covenant He was making with them, then they would gain the great benefits that came from God's instructions.

These verses are also applied to the New Testament Church, calling the Church the LORD's possession ([Titus 2:14](#); [I Pet. 2:9](#)).

Biblical Text:

You are the sons of the Lord your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave your forehead for the sake of the dead.² For you are a holy people to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.