

CHAPTER 3: THE LOVE AND FEAR OF G-D □ PARAGRAPH 1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

The two loftiest means we have of drawing close to G-d, we're told, are to love and fear Him wholeheartedly. But as we'd said, we can experience different sorts of love and fear (see 1:4:8).

At bottom, though, we love G-d best when we love Him for Who He is, in all His Glory (i.e., unconditionally) rather than for all the great good He grants us (i.e., conditionally, and only occasionally). We'll expand upon loving Him the next time, but for now let's touch upon the idea of "fearing" Him, which is a notion that many people are troubled by.

What troubles them is that they just can't fathom the thought of G-d as being fearful. "He's G-d," they say "and He loves me, so why should I be afraid of Him? He'd never do me harm!"

On the one hand, their instincts are quite good, for G-d does indeed love us all. But on the other, they sell G-d short. For G-d Almighty is capable of razing heaven and earth, and of transforming everything we know to nothing we can imagine. So, frankly, His potency should shake us, if not out-and-out frighten us. Nonetheless Ramchal makes the point that that sort of reaction is less than ideal.

What's a better one? It's based on the fact that an alternative translation of the term for fear ("yirah", in Hebrew) is "awe", which is actually the highest form of yirah. For when we fear G-d's might, we tend to draw away from Him, whereas when we stand in awe of it we tend to draw closer to Him in sheer wonder.

In fact, our beings are cleansed of all dross when we're in awe of G-d Almighty, we're taught, and we stand in His presence. In fact, the more in awe of Him we are, the deeper the cleansing and the closer the contact. As such, Moses, who was invariably in awe of G-d, was thus always in His presence.

But make no mistake about it -- it's not easy achieving so exalted a level of awareness of G-d's might and jolt. Yet we're encouraged to strive for higher and higher degrees of it all the time, since it bolsters the mitzvot we do and the Torah we study in ways we'd never expect the way pepper changes eggs.

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