

FEAR OF HEAVEN - NO SMALL MATTER

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

And now, Israel, what does Hashem your G-d ask of you? Only to fear Hashem... (10:12)

The Talmud (Berachos 33b), in reaction to the above pasuk, exclaims: Is fear of Heaven such a small matter?! [The implication of Moshe's wording, "what does Hashem ask of you... only to fear Hashem..." is that this is something simple.] The Sages answer: Yes, with regard to Moshe, it is a small matter. The question, which is asked by almost all the commentators, is blatantly obvious: Even if fear of Heaven (Yir'as Shamayim) is a "simple matter" to Moshe, it is not at all simple to the Jews, whom he addresses. The question thus remains: Why does Moshe imply that to the Jews fear of Heaven is some easy task?

Perhaps we can offer the following answer. The Gemara in many locations (see, for example, Kiddushin 57a) cites a sage named Nachman Ha'Amsuni (others say his name was Shimon Ha'Amsuni) who took upon himself the task of explaining every "es" in the Torah. The word "es" in Hebrew is not normally translated; it is a connecting word which is often superfluous, and even when necessary, has no apparent meaning. Nachman Ha'Amsuni, basing himself on the premise that not one letter of the Written Torah (Torah She-bi'ksav) is superfluous, would as a matter of course explain every "es" in the Torah as coming to include something else besides that which the Torah explicitly discusses. For instance, with regard to tevilah (ritual immersion), the Torah writes (Vayikra/Leviticus 14:9), "And [the man] shall wash his flesh ("es be-saro") with water." The word "es" in this verse, say Chazal (Sotah 15a), comes to include his hair - that even one's hair must be immersed in the mikvah in order for the immersion to be effective.

Everything went smoothly until he reached a verse in this week's sidrah (10:20 - actually, there is a similar verse in last week's sidrah as well [6:13]), "es Hashem your G-d you shall fear!" What, he asked, could the word "es" in this pasuk possibly come to include besides Hashem? What else are we to fear to the extent that its fear could in any way be comparable to the fear of Hashem? [Indeed, as a result of this, he rescinded his opinion that the word "es" was inclusionary. When asked by his students what would come of all the others es's he had invested so much time in elucidating, he replied, "Just as I would have received reward for my efforts [in understanding each instance], so too [now] I will be rewarded for my restraint [in ceasing to explain]!"

Rabbi Akiva, however, disagrees. The word "es" is always inclusionary. In this case, he says, it comes to include Torah scholars (Talmidei Chachamim), who must be feared and revered. [See this year's Olas Shabbos Be-Shabbato, parshas Mattos (#41), for a lengthy discussion of the mitzvah to fear

Torah scholars, particularly one's own teachers. This derasha certainly lends weight to the necessity of fear in the context of the rebbe-student relationship.]

Moshe Rabbeinu thus knew that, to the extent that he demanded the Jews fear Hashem, he was in a sense including himself as well, being the Teacher of Israel and Torah scholar par-excellence. Thus, perhaps, he words his demands in the diminutive: And now, Israel, what does Hashem your G-d ask of you? Only to fear Hashem... - paraphrasing Chazal: With regard to Moshe, it is a small matter - namely, that since the mitzvah to fear Hashem was in fact written with regard to fearing Moshe as well, he makes light of it, not wanting to seem as if what he was asking for was any great deal.

In this context, it perhaps behooves us to mention that the "G-dly fear" mentioned by Rabbi Akiva is in no way saying that man be equated with Hashem. What he is saying is that we can include fear of a Torah scholar in the mitzva to fear Hashem because our fear of the Torah scholar derives itself and emanates from our fear of Hashem. We fear a great Sage not because of the man, but because of Hashem's Torah which is within him. Contrary to some other religious leaders, Jewish Sages do not have the power to arbitrarily "change the law" based on the ever-changing moral code of man. They do not on their own decide what is right and what is wrong; that is the domain of Hashem. They are merely the "spectacles" through which the light of the Torah is refracted and clarified to each generation. There is, however, no room within the halachic framework for personal bias.

Oznayim La-Torah points out that the above verse ("And now Israel...") comes right after Moshe's description of the sin of the Golden Calf, and how he interceded on their behalf and Hashem forgave them. Rashi explains that what Moshe means is, "Even though you have done all this, Hashem still loves you. All He asks is that you fear Him..." The Torah is teaching us, says the Oznayim La-Torah, the correct attitude with which to approach teshuva (repentance): First and foremost - put your past behind you! Our Sages say (Bereishis Rabbah 21:6) that the word "ve-ata, and now," implies teshuva. What they mean is that in order to do teshuva, the first step one must take is to pull himself out of his past into the present. As long as he harps on his past faults and failures, he will never be able to attain the "fresh start" attitude so critical to change and transformation. It is only when we put the past aside, and address the present (and the future) with enthusiasm and positive- energy, that we can possibly hope to accomplish today what we failed so miserably to achieve yesterday.

It is in this context, he says, that yir'as Shamayim is a "small matter." We must approach it with the simplicity of the moment, and not with the complexity of a lifetime, as we are so prone to do. He is not suggesting we simply "sweep the dirt under the carpet;" at some later stage it is imperative that we go back and address past faults, both to ask for forgiveness, and to learn from our mistakes. To do so immediately, however, can often impede the energy and enthusiasm which are so critical to change. Thus, he says, for now - just live for the moment.

Have a good Shabbos.

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