

# FEAR: OUR GREATEST POWER

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

The last of the Aseres Ha-Dibros (Ten Commandments) is lo sachmod - not to be envious of someone else's possessions. Early commentaries already question: How can the Torah legislate against a person's enviousness? If a person experiences envy, how is the mitzvah of lo sachmod going to prevent him from having those feelings?

The Ibn Ezra suggests that Hashem wants our conduct to be so completely dictated by Torah precepts that things that don't belong to us are beyond our reality. Just like a pauper would never in his wildest dreams entertain the thought of marrying the princess, however beautiful she is, so too the possessions of others should be so far removed from our thoughts that we could never imagine desiring them.

Put differently, we can read stories about exceptionally wealthy or gifted people of past generations without experiencing jealousy - because we're removed from their reality. That is the extent to which we should internalize the Torah's concepts of others' property, he says.

The Beis Ha-Levi suggests a different answer that has repercussions not only to the mitzvah of lo sachmod but to all of the Torah's mitzvos, not to mention the sometimes hard-to-grasp concept of yiras Shamayim (fear of Heaven).

Suppose, he says, you were consumed by desire for something. Suppose that the object of your desire was not difficult for you to obtain. Overcome by the yetzer hara's overtures, you are completely helpless and decide to sin. Suppose that the object of your desires is on the other side of a frozen river. As you cross the river, the ice beneath you begins to crack, your foot slips in to the icy waters, and you are moments away from being swallowed up by the undercurrent. You fall to the ground and scrape at the ice with all your might; your very life hangs in the balance.

At that moment, as you battle the freezing waters, are you still in the throes of your forbidden infatuation? Not likely.

Fear is the most powerful emotion. The fear of imminent death completely overwhelms our previous frenzy of desire - the same one we just a minute ago thought was insurmountable! By the way, it doesn't even have to be fear of death. Maybe he slipped on the ice, and is in the process of falling to the ground. Even the momentary fear of falling is far more powerful than the throes of desire. For at least as long as the fear lasts, all cravings are temporarily put on hold.

Oy va-voy. Do you realize what he's saying? It means that when we give in to sin, our yiras Shamayim is so weak that it doesn't even measure up to the momentary fear of someone about to lose their balance. The nature of man is such that even a relatively minor fear outweighs all sorts of desire. The sinner bears witness on himself, he says, that he has not achieved even the smallest measure of yiras Shamayim. To paraphrase the words of a contemporary poet: Our greatest power is our own fear.

When we sin, Beis Ha-Levi points out, we mistakenly rationalize that we were powerless; our desires were so strong we were unable to resist them, despite our good intentions. But for a drop of yiras Shamayim!

The yetzer hara (i.e. human perversity), no doubt, is a formidable opponent. "Were it not for Hashem's help," our Sages say, "it would be virtually impossible to overcome." Yet we have just discovered the yetzer hara's secret weakness - the potent antidote to human weakness and the seduction of sin -- the fearing heart cannot sin.

And now, Israel, what does Hashem ask of you, but to fear Hashem your G-d (Devarim/Deuteronomy 10:12). Is that really all? Seemingly not, because the verse continues: to walk in His ways, love Him, and serve Hashem your G-d... And furthermore, in the words of Chazal (Berachos 33b), "Is fear of Heaven such a small matter?"

Yes! It is a small matter. The odds are completely skewed in our favor. The smallest measure of fear has the capacity to overcome the most powerful of desires.

Mefarshim question what the mitzvah of "do not desire" is doing among the Ten Commandments, the other nine of which seem to address some of the most fundamental aspects of Judaism.

According to the Beis Ha-Levi, the way we overcome covetousness - through fear of Heaven - is the secret key which unlocks our power to overcome all aspects of human weakness.

A devoted talmid (disciple) of R. Noach of Lechovitz passed away at a young age. His untimely death was the source of great sadness among the rest of the chasidim, and after escorting their friend to his final resting place, they returned to the beis ha-midrash where they bemoaned their loss.

"Oy," one cried, "what a masmid (diligent scholar)! He would sit for hours studying page after page of the Gemara, without even the smallest of breaks!"

"And what a pious man," another said. "He refused to ever borrow money, lest he forget to pay back, and he never spoke about anyone else out of concern he might inadvertently come to gossip."

"What a kind heart he had," a third said. "He often went hungry so that someone less fortunate would have a warm meal."

"And what a yirei Shamayim!" another friend piped in.

With that comment, R. Noach, who was within earshot of their conversation, coughed, drawing their attention. "Our friend," he said, "was a pious soul, and we will miss him dearly - but please do not be so quick to throw around the title yirei Shamayim.

"I am a wealthy and influential man, as you know," the Rebbe said. "Let Heaven and earth bear witness right now that I would gladly forfeit everything I have for just one more drop of yiras Shamayim!" Have a good Shabbos. Text Copyright © 2008 by [Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann](#) and

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