

# HEAVEN-LIKE CLARITY

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

## **Now, Israel, what does God, your God, ask of you? Only to fear God, your God ... (Devarim 10:12)**

These words are a central part of Moshe Rabbeinu's farewell address to the Jewish people on the last day of his life. True, there are 613 mitzvos in total, of which fear of God is but one of them, but, explained Moshe Rabbeinu, the main point of all of them is the same thing: fear of God.

The Talmud reiterates this point:

All is in the hands of Heaven except fear of Heaven, as it says, "Now, Israel, what does God, your God, ask of you? Only to fear ...." (Devarim 10:12) ... Rebi Chanina said in the name of Rebi Shimon bar Yochai: The Holy One, Blessed is He, only has fear of God in His storehouse, as it says, "Fear of God is His storehouse" (Yeshayahu 33:6). (Brochos 33b)

No one will deny that fear of God is an extremely important spiritual trait, especially for keeping the yetzer hara in line. However, though fear of punishment goes a long way for keeping people on the straight and narrow, surely Moshe Rabbeinu and the Talmud refer to something far more profound.

More profound, perhaps like in the story of Yocheved and Miriam, the two midwives who disobeyed Pharaoh by not killing the male Jewish babies. As the Torah states:

The midwives feared God, and disobeyed the king of Egypt, saving the children. (Shemos 1:17)

By writing the verse as it did, making reference to the fear of God of the midwives before their heroic act, the Torah emphasizes the fear of God these women possessed over the act of saving the Jewish babies. It is as if to say that without their fear of God, they might not have considered taking such a phenomenal risk in the first place. Such is the power of yireh Shamayim-fear of Heaven.

This is the point that Moshe Rabbeinu was teaching. Even though fear of God is included in the list of the 613 Mitzvos, it is also different from the other 612. In fact, all of the other mitzvos can be said to be included in it, since it represents the outlook that makes all the other mitzvos possible and meaningful.

Moshe Rabbeinu was telling the Jewish people that without fear of God, observing the mitzvos becomes a burden. However, with fear of God, performing the 613 Mitzvos becomes a labor of love, something one does as a natural expression of his or her desire to be close to God, something which

will usually manifest itself in the way one deals with the needs of other people over their own.

This is clear from the story of Avimelech, the king of Gerar who kidnapped Sarah, the wife of Avraham Avinu, for himself after being told by Avraham that she was only his sister.

However, before he could lay a hand on her, God spoke to him and revealed her true status, which shook Avimelech up when he realized how close he had come to committing adultery. However, in his defense the Torah writes:

Avimelech had not approached her, so he said, "God, will you slay a nation even though it is righteous?" (Bereishis 20:4)

Righteous? How could he have called himself or his nation righteous? Even had Sarah really been Avraham's sister, did she consent to being taken by Avimelech? Had Avraham agreed to her abduction? As Avraham later told an upset Avimelech, he had lied about Sarah:

"Because I said, 'There is but no fear of God in this place and they will kill me because of my wife'." (Bereishis 20:11)

But, how did Avraham Avinu know this? What had he seen during his short stay in such a booming metropolis that indicated to him that all that was missing from such an advanced place was yireh Shamayaim?

This is what Rashi says Avraham asked Avimelech:

When a stranger arrives in a city, do people ask him about what he would like to eat or to drink, or do they ask him about his wife? (Rashi, Bereishis 20:11)

In other words, Avraham reproved Avimelech by saying:

"If your people are going to ask me about anything at all, it should be about my needs. If they ask about my relationship to the woman accompanying me, then it is evident that they are not God-fearing people! God-fearing people act in a Godly manner, and if they do not, then you know they will do whatever they want to achieve their own goals, including kill me for my wife."

Thus, according to Rashi, it is fear of God that allows one to put the requirements of others before their own personal needs. Hence the verse, regarding Yocheved and Miriam, says:

The midwives feared God, and disobeyed the king of Egypt, saving the children. (Shemos 1:17)

This is what life is all about, as the Talmud teaches and Rashi explains:

All is in the hands of Heaven except fear of Heaven, as it says, "Now, Israel, what does God, your God, ask of you? Only to fear ...." ( Devarim 10:12) ... Rebi Chanina said in the name of Rebi Shimon bar Yochai: The Holy One, Blessed is He, only has fear of God in His storehouse, as it says, "Fear of God is His storehouse" (Yeshayahu 33:6). (Brochos 33b)

All that comes to a person is in the hands of The Holy One, Blessed is He. For example, whether he will be tall or short, poor or rich, wise or foolish, light or dark-all of this is determined by Heaven. However, whether he will be righteous or evil is not in the hands of Heavens, but in the hands of man. Two paths are placed before him, and he has to choose fear of God for himself. (Rashi)

But, what does it mean to choose fear of God? What is a person actually choosing?

According to the Talmud, not the givens in life, those things that exist, either in us, in other people, or in the situations in which we may find ourselves regardless of our will or desire. They are that with which we have to work while trying to achieve fear of God.

Such givens are, in effect, the pre-designed stage upon which we find ourselves acting out our lives, and the only question is: How will you choose to respond to all of it? In a way that indicates a clear vision of God in all that occurs, or just the opposite?

Hence, the word for fear in Hebrew is the same as the word for seeing- yireh. For, true fear of God is really the seeing of God in all that happens in history, no matter how random events may seem to be, and acting in a noble manner that is consistent with such a vision, as the midwives did, and Avimelech did not.

For a Yisroel, there is only the one path to follow as Ya'akov Avinu told his sons:

Yisroel their father said to them, "If it must be so, then do this." (Bereishis 43:11)

In the story of Yosef's 22-year exile away from home, and all that occurred until the time of his reunion with his father, this verse represents a climax. Until this point, Ya'akov had suffered the violation of his daughter in Shechem, the usurping of his authority by his sons, Shimon and Levi, the selling of Yosef, the imprisonment of Shimon in Egypt, and who knows what else that is not recorded in the Torah. And now, as the famine worsened in Canaan and depleted their resources, he had to endure sending Binyomin down to Egypt and into danger as well.

Many a person might have cracked under the weight of so much bad fortune, especially when expectations had been so high. Nevertheless, Ya'akov Avinu, referred to in the above verse as Yisroel, instead took up the challenge and acted the best way he could, in spite of the givens in his life.

As a result, he turned the predicament around, and the situation kept improving until his dreams of

reunion with Yosef were fulfilled. And thus, as Yosef embraced his father and cried in joy on his neck, Ya'akov, instead, recited the Shema and proclaimed God's unity (Rashi, Bereishis 46:29).

That is, Yisroel proclaimed that all that he had undergone had been engineered by God, and for his benefit. The final test of his spiritual vision came at the dramatic moment of the actual encounter with Yosef, when he looked right past Yosef and saw God instead-true yireh Shamayim.

This is what it means to be a true Yisroel, to be able to see the hand of God in even the darkest of moments, and trust that God is still running the show, and that all is for the good. Even the chaos in Creation is micromanaged by God down to the last detail, no matter how random and out of control it appears to us.

It is such a vision that allows the Light of 36 to break forth from the depths of Shechem, illuminate the darkness of Creation, rectifying it. Hence, regarding Amalek it says:

Remember what Amalek did to you along your way when you left Egypt. He confronted you on your way, and attacked the feeble stragglers who trailed behind you, while you were tired and exhausted. He did not fear God. (Devarim 25:17-18)

Interestingly, if you subtract the gematria of yireh, which is 216 from the gematria of Amalek, which is 240, the result is 24, the number of letters that Ya'akov used to compose the words Boruch Shem kevod Malchuso l'olam va-ed when answering his sons. According to the Zohar, they were Ya'akov's way of telling his sons that there was something lacking in their understanding of the unity of God, and therefore, their yireh Shamayaim (see, The Big Picture: 36 Sessions to Intellectual and Spiritual Clarity).

Conceptually, it is certainly true: It is yireh, together with Boruch Shem kevod, which represents a Heaven-like clarity of God here on earth, necessary to counteract the Name-dividing reality of Amalek. This is what rectifies the Jewish people, and all of Creation for that matter, until the verse:

On that day, God will be one and His Name, one. (Zechariah 14:9)

is finally fulfilled.

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