

LOVE, AWE, HUMILITY, WISDOM, AND BIRDS

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Why did Dovid Hamelech write, "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of G-d?" (Tehillim 111:10) Why did he choose the "fear of G-d" more than "ws ,cvt" - the love of G-d as the "beginning of wisdom?"

At the beginning of the second chapter of The Rambam's (Maimonides) Laws of The Fundamentals of the Torah, the Rambam discusses the Mitzvah of Loving G-d and Fearing G-d.

(The accurate translation of "Yirah" as it is used in this context is "awe", or "being in awe of" rather than "fear" or "being afraid of." However, "Yiras G-d" is commonly translated as "Fear of G-d.")

The Rambam establishes that loving G-d is the precursor to fearing G-d. First a person must recognize G-d's beneficence and goodness before he can appreciate G-d's awesomeness. First a person must accept that G-d cares about each human, creature, and the entire universe before he can appreciate the awesomeness of G-d's ability to care about each human, creature, and the entire universe. Once a person has attained the level of Yirah - being in awe of G-d, he realizes that G-d is the "Omnipotent, Eternal, Almighty" and that he is by contrast a insignificant momentary pause on the continuum of destiny. In simpler terms, the human is humbled. The human learns humility.

Ahavah - love, or loving G-d, involves awareness of G-d's goodness. It assumes that the person accepts that all things happen under G-d's personal supervision. It assumes the belief that G-d is good rather than indifferent and that everything G-d does is good. It assumes that everything that G-d does is done for our benefit.

Belief in G-d's goodness does not necessarily evoke humility. It should evoke appreciation and the desire to give back to G-d in some way. It does create a bond between G-d and ourselves that can be called "loving;" however, it does not necessarily humble the person.

Love does not have to include humility. Two loving people can admire each other greatly and appreciate each other for their individual talents and accomplishments; yet, they remain emotionally and intellectually equal to each other. Each one may excel in his or her area of expertise and be able to do what they do better than anyone else; yet, it will not humble the other person. In fact, each one may feel very proud of himself and grow to be egotistical about his or her own abilities.

It is Yirah - being in awe - that teaches humility. Imagine a business that sells ideas to other industries (otherwise known as consultants). The company is a partnership between two very bright

and creative "thinkers" who appreciate and admire each other's talents; however, one of the two is exceptionally bright and creative. He is absolutely brilliant in the profundity of his analysis and the all-encompassing vision of his solutions. Imagine that the "better of the two" is consistently flawless - he never makes a mistake.

On the other hand, the other partner is no slouch. Within their chosen industry he is also highly acclaimed and respected for his intelligence and accomplishments; however, the other partner is recognized as above and beyond mere mortals. He truly leaps tall buildings with a single bound. He is reputed to have "written the book" for the industry and every time he speaks or publishes he "rewrites the book that he already wrote!"

When the two partners sit down to solve a problem or sell an idea the "great one" is solicitous, encouraging, and complimentary of the "lesser one." He allows his partner to share ideas and solutions. He is never impatient or sarcastic. He is never supercilious or patronizing. In fact, his demeanor is best described as loving and respectful; however, it is doubtful that he feels awe for his partner.

On the other hand, the "lesser" partner also loves his partner. He appreciates his sensitivity and encouragement. He feels comfortable within the relationship and empowered to speak his mind without fear of ridicule or criticism. He is proud to be a partner and proud of the company's success and accomplishments; however, when he considers himself relative to his "extraordinary" partner he is acutely aware of his own limitations. He recognizes the vast gulf that separates competence, diligence, and hard work from true brilliance and greatness. It would be fair to say that he is "in awe" of his partner.

Being in awe of one's partner does not deny self-worth or accomplishment. It has nothing to do with personal inability or failure. It is simply the recognition that in the arena of one's chosen profession, no matter how competent and successful he may be, there is another who is far, far, better. By contrast we should be humbled, never lessened.

Yirah (awe) requires contrast. If the "lesser" partner was great in sales but could not get to first-base when it came to research and development, there could still be love and admiration for his partner, but he could not be in awe. To be in awe of a particular success presumes that one can appreciate what it takes to succeed.

As a self-proclaimed mathematically challenged adult I know that computers compute at "awesome" speed; however, I do not really know what that means. I certainly do not appreciate their speed the way a brilliant mathematician who spends his life computing the vast variables of industry and technology would appreciate them.

Each of us knows what it takes to care for something. It might be caring for self, another, a pet, or a business or whatever big or small thing we are responsible for. Caring takes time, strength, and many other resources. For many, caring at whatever level is exhausting; the point being, we all have

an idea of what it means to truly care and be responsible. That is the contrast we must have if we are to be in awe of G-d the way the Rambam explained Yirah. By knowing what it takes to be responsible in the limited spheres of our own lives we are able to extrapolate to the impossibility of caring for an entire universe. That is why we can feel "in awe" of G-d. On the other hand, a young child who never experienced having to care or be responsible has no means of appreciating what it could mean to care for the entire universe. Such a child could never be in awe of G-d.

Love creates the relationship and awe humbles; however, in order to succeed humility is not enough. Humility must also bring about wisdom.

Navigating a space ship is not like driving a car - or is it? To know the difference I must first have some understanding of the complexities of piloting a space ship; otherwise I would never know the necessity of hiring a pilot or navigator. If I were determined to travel through space I would have to accept the limits of my own competence (or incompetence) and find the person that could compute the variables of space travel, plot the course, and take us wherever. Therefore, accomplishment and success demands more than humility; it also demands the wisdom to accept the limits of my strengths and weaknesses and find those capable of doing what I need done but which I cannot do for myself.

Wisdom is the byproduct of humility and humility is the consequence of Yirah (awe). "Who is a wise man? The one who is able to learn from every person". A wise man knows that all people are limited and no one person has the exclusive on all wisdom; therefore, he accepts his own limitations and seeks solutions from others. My brother Rav Mordecai Shlit'a explained to me that a significant reason why we rule like Bais Hillel over Bais Shamai is because Bais Hillel had a larger number of students than Bais Shamai. Within the framework of "majority rules" Bais Hillel was of the opinion that there was wisdom and truth to be gleaned when opening the discussion to all the students. Sometimes, the least advanced student can see something that the most advanced scholar will miss. Therefore, Bais Hillel would hold Halachik deliberations in the open forum of the Bais Medresh (study hall) where the most advanced and the novice could join in the discussion. Bais Shamai on the other hand invited only the best and most advanced students to participate in the Halachik discussions and deliberations.

The wisest and most advanced scholar realizes that he too is limited; therefore, it is possible to glean truth and wisdom from anyone and everyone. That is called humility and that is called wisdom.

There are two Mitzvos where the Torah states the reward of longevity. Honoring parents and Sending away the Mother Bird (22:7) Rav S.R.Hirsch has a novel approach that connects the two Mitzvos. He explained that both Mitzvos focus on showing deference to the parental figure. Honoring Parents inculcates the child with an understanding that he or she is not "equal" to the parents. Regardless of how successful or educated the child might be and how uneducated and unsuccessful the parents might be, the child must show respect to the parents. At the very least it is

a symbolic statement that we are all the products of past accomplishments and that we owe our wisdom to the loyal transmission of Torah.

Sending away the Mother Bird expresses "respect for the dignity of motherhood." It forces us to realize that we too owe who and what we are to a preceding generation. No matter how modern and advanced we think we are we did not get here by ourselves. If not for the commitment of our parents and the generations that preceded them we would not exist. Both Mitzvos teach us humility and both Mitzvos prepare us to accept wisdom.

Living a long life is a divine gift. It is granted to those who are wise enough to be humbled by the passage of time. It is granted to those who are wise enough to be humbled by the gifts granted by parents and grandparents. Our purpose in creation is to impart humility and wisdom to the world. Those who embrace humility and accept that they are but a "momentary pause on the continuum of destiny" deserve to live longer because they have proven themselves to be the wisest of all.

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