

INTRODUCTION BY SINA KAHEN

Defining *Yirah*

Of all the emotions that define the human experience, *fear* stands out as both universal and deeply personal. This emotion, a survival mechanism from our hunter-gatherer days, has evolved with us, becoming intertwined with our cultures, religions, and philosophies.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a 20th century theologian, wrote a seminal essay on fear titled ‘Overcoming Fear.’ In it, he invites us to reconsider our relationship with fear. Unlike other animals, governed largely by their instincts, humans possess an innate ability to confront and potentially overcome their fears. Bonhoeffer posits that faith acts not just as a comfort but as a potent weapon against fear. It is worth noting that in the age of empires and epic battles, faith often played a role more powerful than the mightiest of armies.

Aristotle, the polymath of Ancient Greece, dissected the concept of fear in his work ‘Rhetoric,’ conceiving it as the apprehension of future misfortunes. For him, fear isn’t a standardised checklist, identical across humanity. Rather, it’s a deeply personal, ever-changing presence, moulded by our perceptions of future adversities. Elsewhere, Aristotle posits that fear left unchecked can veer into the realm of vice. True virtue, he suggests, is in courage – the golden mean between debilitating fear and overzealous confidence.

Yet, when we turn to the pages of our Torah, we are presented with a distinct perspective. The Torah introduces a different type of fear that it terms “*yirah*”. Far from being a mere survival response, it is used in reference to humanity’s approach to God, and is described as the mainspring of morality and wisdom, leading to material prosperity and well-being. The “*yirah*” of God, in this sense, is not about shrinking away but rather drawing closer to the Creator in reverential awe. It is a fear that is identical with love and service, as emphasised in Deuteronomy: to fear God is to walk in His ways, to love Him, and to serve Him with all one’s heart and soul.¹

Biblical figures, from Abraham’s diplomatic dealings with Abimelech to Joseph’s assurance to his kin, allude to this revered “*yirah*” as a moral compass. The Egyptian midwives, defying Pharaoh to save Israelite children, exemplified this fear, not as dread of punishment but as a deep respect for God.

¹ Deuteronomy 10:12

This notion is further crystallised in Rabbinic literature, where it transforms into “*yirat shamayim*” or “fear of Heaven.” Here, it is not just another emotion; it is the pinnacle of Jewish virtue. The rabbis, with their poetic flair, illustrate that all exists under heaven’s purview, except for the very reverence of it!² The key to understanding the profound wisdom of the Torah, they argue, lies not just in learning but in the synthesis of knowledge with this deep-seated reverence.

Fear as Reverence

In Genesis 28:17, the narrative of Jacob’s dream of a ladder extending to heaven offers a profound insight into the nature of “*yirah*”. The 19th century Italian, Rabbi Yitzhak Reggio, commentates on the word used to describe Jacob’s reaction to his dream (יִירָא):

יִירָא

“And as Jacob pondered the wonderful vision that he was privileged to in his dream, the awe of His exaltedness, may He be exalted, rose in his heart.”

Here, Jacob’s “*yirah*” is not mere fear but a profound reverence for the Divine, a humbling realisation of the grandeur and immediacy of God’s presence. This awe-inspiring moment leads to a transformative awareness, where Jacob’s perception of the Divine realm elevates, signifying the deep connection between humility, reverence, and spiritual enlightenment.

The Book of Proverbs (9:9-10) further elaborates on this concept of “*yirah*” as a foundation for wisdom. It states, “*The **fear** of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*”

This proverb aligns “fear” (*yirah*) with “knowledge” (*da’at*), indicating that “*yirah*” encompasses an awareness and realisation far beyond conventional fear. It implies that the initial step to wisdom is not fear in its simplistic form but a profound reverence and awe of the Divine. This sense of awe is not only humbling but also opens one to the receptivity of Divine wisdom and knowledge. In this context, “fear of the Lord” is synonymous with a deep understanding and acknowledgment of God’s omnipresence and omnipotence.

HaRambam’s Approach

HaRambam delves into this reverential notion of fear with characteristic depth and precision. In an early chapter of his *Mishneh Torah*, HaRambam lays the groundwork for this concept:

*“And what is the way of loving Him and **fearing** Him? When a man reflects upon His wondrous great works and creatures and perceives from them His inestimable and infinite*

² Babylonian Talmud, 33b

*wisdom, he at once loves, praises, glorifies, and yearns greatly to know the Great Name—as David said: My soul thirsts for God, for the living God [Ps 42:3]. And when he meditates on these things themselves, he at once recoils in a start, and will **fear** and tremble and know that he is a small, lowly, dark creature standing with slight insignificant understanding before [Him who is] perfect in understanding.”³*

HaRambam reveals a profound insight: an individual’s contemplation on God’s vast creations can evoke both overwhelming love and deep-seated “*yirah*”. Expanding on this theme, HaRambam later states:

*“When a man reflects on these things and acknowledges all the created things, from angel and sphere [to] man and the like, and sees the wisdom of the Holy One (blessed be He) in all the formed and created things, he increases the love for God. His soul thirsts, his flesh longs to love God. He will **fear** and tremble on account of his lowliness, wretchedness, and insignificance when he compares himself to one of the great holy bodies...”⁴*

In other words, the more one reflects on God’s creations, where everything is meticulously ordered for a purpose, the closer one feels to God. However, this proximity also brings about the realisation of one’s own limitations compared to the Divine, eliciting profound “*yirah*”.

These insights from HaRambam dovetail seamlessly with the theme of “*yirah*” as reverence and awe. His approach complements Jacob’s experience and Proverb’s recommendation, by showing that such “*yirah*” is intertwined with love and humility. The awe of God’s creations and the recognition of His infinite wisdom lead to a love for the Divine, while simultaneously evoking a humble reverence due to the awareness of our own finite understanding.

The Role of Fear in Human Behaviour

In a later section of the Mishneh Torah, HaRambam distinguishes between a deeper form of love and a basic kind of fear. This basic fear is based on the expectation of rewards or the fear of punishments. It is a mindset often seen in those who, out of ignorance, follow Divine commands more for personal benefits than out of a genuine respect for God. However, HaRambam recognises the instructive importance of this initial fear. He notes:

“When instructing the young, women, or those less knowledgeable, we initially motivate them to worship God due to fear or the hope of rewards. As their understanding deepens, we reveal a more profound truth, guiding them to worship God out of pure affection.”⁵

³ Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Yesode HaTorah 2:2

⁴ Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Yesode HaTorah 4:12

⁵ Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Teshuba 10:1-2

He compares this method of instruction to parenting, where early on rewards and punishments are used as teaching mechanisms, leading eventually to deeper comprehension and intrinsic motivation.

Fear, Love, and Everything in Between

We now turn to one final idea expressed by HaRambam:

“In accordance with one’s knowledge will be the love of God – if much knowledge, then much love, and if little knowledge, then little love.”⁶

HaRambam accentuates the intricate bond between knowledge and Divine love. This proclamation resonates deeply with what we have explored thus far. If ‘fear’, as we’ve explored, is an intricate play between understanding the infinite vastness of God and our own human limitations, love follows suit, but on a slightly different note. The deeper one dives into the vast sea of knowledge about the universe, its design, and the Creator, the more one is filled with love for the Divine force behind it all. HaRambam’s assertion can be perceived as a continuation of the dialogue on fear.

As ‘fear’ stands for awe and reverence stemming from our understanding of the universe, then ‘love’ is the emotional aftermath of this comprehension.

A profound knowledge and understanding does not merely instigate awe; it kindles a fervent love. The interconnectedness of knowledge, fear, and love suggests a powerful concert of emotions that guide our relationship with the Divine.

This conception of fear emphasises the equilibrium between the pursuit of knowledge and the acceptance of human limitations. This balance has ultimately steered the moral and ethical compass of Yisrael, guiding our People towards a life of wisdom. ♦

⁶ Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Teshuba 10:6