

Lesson 5 Q3-Yirah Draft

One of the first mitzvot that the Rambam discusses in his magnum opus, the Mishneh Torah, is the Mitzvah to fear G-d.

Text 1:

יסודי התורה ב א'הל

האל הנכבד והנורא הזה מצוה לאהבו וליראה אותו שנאמר (דברים ו ה) "ואהבת את ה' אלהיך". ונאמר (דברים ו יג) "את ה' אלהיך תירא":

Question:

One thing that everyone in society can agree on is that fear destroys relationships. If you are constantly afraid of your spouse then everyone from your psychologist to your well-meaning friend will tell you that you are stuck in a toxic relationship.

If G-d loves us and wants to have a healthy relationship with us then why does He command us to fear him?

Definition of fear:

Clearly, the fear that destroys relationships must be different than the emotion found in the heart of a truly *G-d fearing Jew*. How so?

The American Psychological Association defines fear as “a basic and intense emotion aroused by the detection of an imminent threat.”¹ This is how society interprets fear today. It is also why fear has such a negative connotation. No one enjoys being in the presence of a threat.

Since “fear of G-d” is supposed to strengthen our relationship with Him it cannot be predicated on viewing G-d as a threat.² “Fear of G-d” is a healthy emotion that stems from a deep appreciation of G-d’s greatness.

Let us see how the Rambam describes fear of G-d.

Text 2:

הל' יסודי התורה ב, ב

והיאך היא הדרך לאהבתו ויראתו. בשעה שיתבונן האדם במעשיו וברואיו הנפלאים הגדולים ויראה מהן חכמתו שאין לה ערה ולא קץ וכו' מייד הוא נרתע לאחוריו ויפחד ויודע שהוא בריה קטנה שפלה אפלה עומדת בדעת קלה מעוטה לפגי תמים דעות.

The Rambam is describing an emotion that stems from an appreciation of how great

¹ <https://dictionary.apa.org/fear>

² There is a concept in Judaism called *fear of punishment*. This is something that is found throughout the Torah. It is not to be confused with *fear of G-d*. In the latter I fear G-d while in the former I only fear the punishment. Furthermore, *fear of punishment* is selfish while *fear of G-d* is selfless (see page...).

G-d is, and how small we are in comparison to Him. This overwhelming feeling can be more accurately described as *awe*.

Awe is a combination of admiration, humility, and respect.³ You admire something so much that you are humbled by it. This combination of admiration and humility leads to respect.

Exercise:

- Ask your students to describe a moment when they were awestruck.
- To prompt them you can discuss how the beauty and vastness of nature (large waterfalls, tall peaks, etc.) can often lead to such moments.
- Explain to them how this feeling is a recognition of how small you are in comparison to the beauty, vastness, greatness, intelligence, etc. of whatever is causing this emotion—exactly the emotion described by the Rambam.⁴

Exercise:

Imagine yourself standing in front of a king. First, set the stage. You are standing at the entrance of the throne room. You notice the many guards in their shining armor. You take in the expensive rugs and furniture, the stunning architecture, the beautiful paintings. How do you feel?

You start walking into the room and notice the great stage which holds the most magnificent throne you have ever seen. Ask yourself again, what are you feeling right now?

Sitting on that throne is the greatest ruler the land has ever known. He is the smartest, strongest, most compassionate leader you can imagine. Most importantly he is your king. What emotions are you feeling?⁵ You admire his greatness. You feel humbled by his presence. You cannot help but respect his majesty. You are in awe.

Application:

When one finds themselves in awe of something it is often just for a fleeting moment. How can we capture that moment, and keep it with us at all times? Furthermore, is this meant to be just an abstract emotion or can it be used to change a person for the better?

The following meditation from Tanya can help us attain those goals.

Text 3:

והנה ה' כו' תניא...

³ This is what we mean when throughout this lesson we use terms like respect or humility to refer to “fear of G-d”.

⁴ Optional: If you have extra time and a student is describing a moment in nature, or if you brought up such an example yourself, then you can take the extra step of explaining that all of this beauty is created by G-d. If this is how I feel when standing before His creations then imagine how I would feel standing in front of Him!

⁵ If he is truly a worthy king, then he will not be erratic. The only reason to fear that he may harm you would be if you rebelled against him. In that case you are not truly fearing him, you are fearing the punishment (see footnote 2).

When you realize that this awe inspiring G-d is actually watching you at all times that leads you to a constant awareness of his presence. Wherever you go, whatever you do, you are always humbled by the awareness that He is watching you.

Think back to the example of the king. When you are standing before the king, how do you behave? You behave with respect. You make sure that all of your actions are in line with whatever the king deems appropriate. If you are constantly in the presence of the king then you will constantly behave in an appropriate manner.

This logic applies tenfold to the king of all kings. G-d is always watching. Certain behavior is unthinkable in his presence. The knowledge that we are always in G-d's presence should inspire us to better ourselves, and act in ways that He deems appropriate.

Why:

If the only purpose of being G-d fearing is to inspire us to act in ways that He deems appropriate then “fear of G-d” is seemingly redundant. The same can be accomplished out of love. If you love someone enough, and you know that the only way to cement a relationship with them is by behaving in a certain way then you will do whatever it takes to accomplish that. Can “fear of G-d” strengthen our relationship with Him in ways that love never can?

The answer is yes.

Humans are naturally selfish creatures. The things that drive us and the decisions that we make are usually selfish in nature. This is true on all levels. We want to eat and sleep so that we can live and be healthy. We want to go on vacation or watch our favorite shows so that we can enjoy ourselves. We want to find meaning in life so that we can lead fulfilled lives. We want to help people so that we feel good about ourselves. Even when we don't necessarily mean to we are usually focused on ourselves.

The problem with this is that the more we focus on our selves the further we are from G-d. This is true with any relationship. If you really want to get close to someone you have to focus entirely on that person. The more that you focus on yourself the less space there is in the relationship for your friend, spouse, etc. Similarly, a true relationship with G-d has to be founded upon the nullification of one's self. Through nullifying ourselves we create space for G-d to enter our lives. Fear of G-d is completely selfless and therefore creates that space.

(If we want to insert a text here we can insert from ו on page ש there is a piece that talks about how avodas eved is more selfless than ahava which is usually taluy bedavar.)⁶

Love by nature is selfish. I love you because you sustain me. You love someone because they afford you the opportunity to interact with something beautiful, because they love you back, and ultimately because loving them makes you feel good. If your relationship is based solely on love

⁶ Over there it continues to say that eved pashut has even more bitul because there is no sense of self whatsoever. I am taking mostly from the first nekuda (most ahavah is taluy bedavar...) but also a little bit from the nekudah later in the maamer—eved pashut—yirah can lead to a place where I have to serve Hashem (respect my spouse) even if I don't want to. That is something that ahavah can never attain.

then if one day your spouse doesn't make you feel good anymore the foundation of your relationship is gone, and sooner or later you will end up choosing yourself over them.

Respect, on the other hand, is humbling. That is why it is the best possible foundation for commitment. If you respect someone then even if you are not receiving anything from them you will still respect them, no matter the cost. Someone who is in a committed relationship must respect their spouse because it is the respect that will keep the relationship afloat through all of the ups and the downs.

When one's service of G-d is propelled by love then his mind may be filled with thoughts about G-d. However, the emotion that is driving him is one that says, "I love G-d, I want to connect with Him, I want to do whatever it takes to make him happy." Notice the beginning of each thought. I love, I want, and again I want. His connection to G-d is founded upon his own desires. He wants to help G-d because it makes him feel good. On its own, this is not enough, for he is ultimately focused on himself.

Awe, on the other hand, is a humbling emotion. The emotion that is most dominant when standing before a king is humility. You feel tiny, absolutely unworthy. You are aware of how great he is, but that does not make you jump for joy, it humbles you. When you behave appropriately in front of a king you are doing so out of reverence and respect not merely out of love and passion.

When one acts out of reverence he is driven by an emotion that says, "I must act appropriately whether I like it or not." He is fully focused on G-d and not at all on himself. His own desires don't matter, they don't take up any space. Fear of G-d takes us out of our naturally selfish state and therefore leads us closer to G-d in a way that love never could.