

The Meaning of the Fear of Heaven

VaYera

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It is not an exaggeration to say that, from a rabbinic perspective, the defining spiritual attribute one may possess, or lack, is the fear of Heaven, **יראת שמים**, otherwise referred to as fear of the Lord, **יראת ה'.** To cite just a few classical example, the Talmud¹ cites the teaching of R. Elazar that Fear of the Lord is God's singular interest in this world; Rav Yehuda² is cited in the same context as suggesting that the Almighty created the world for this very purpose, that humans should be filled with a sense of His awe; Rava³ notes that our arrival in the celestial tribunal will be occasioned with a battery of six queries, and even a life which warrants an affirmative answer to all six questions, concerning our commitment to honesty, Torah study, continuity of our people, and other justly celebrated values is only considered worthwhile if it was defined by Fear of Heaven.

Colloquially, to say that someone is God fearing is to testify to the totality of his spiritual persona. And yet, if one were pressed to answer, what exactly this term means, to identify its constituent properties, one may find providing anything approaching a precise answer quite difficult.

Let us begin, then, by saying what it is not. It is not synonymous with fear of punishment, **יראת העונש.** While this, too, can be a vital attribute to possess with respect to assuring basic compliance with required norms, and Rambam did, in one critical source⁴, affiliate the two, they are plainly not the same. One relates to a desire to avoid negative consequences, and one, it would seem, relates to something far more idealistic and ambitious. In Mishneh Torah itself, Rambam⁵ relates Fear of Heaven to having an appreciation of the chasm between one's own limited cognitive capacity, and finite existence, and God's perfect intellect and awesome powers of creation.

Nor is Fear of Heaven to be conflated with fear of sin, **יראת חטא**, a kind of reflexive, visceral recoil from sin. After all, in the passage⁶ which became the basis for our birkhat ha-chodesh, the two terms are used distinctly: we ask for lives of **יראת שמים** and **יראת חטא**, characterized by both of these virtues. By definition, then, they cannot be the same.

¹ Talmud Bavli, Masekhet Shabbat, 31b

² ibid

³ Ibid (31a)

⁴ Sefer Ha-Mitzvot, Mitzvot Aseh, 4.

⁵ Hilkhoh Yesodei Ha-Torah, 2:1-2.

⁶ Talmud Bavli, Masekhet Brachot 16b.

Finally, fear of Heaven is not synonymous with its sister virtue⁷, love of Heaven, 'אהבת ה', a sense of near obsessive rapture with the Divine⁸, predicated on intimate knowledge of Him, which facilitates not merely compliance with required norms, but exhilaration in spiritual life altogether.

What, then, is Fear of Heaven?

Let us try to provide an approach based on Biblical paradigms. In Parashat Shemot, we encounter two midwives, Shifra and Pu'ah, responsible for supervising the delivery of Jewish children. They are asked by a person of enormous power to directly participate in, and likely supervise, an infanticide on a massive scale. Though they had every reason to expect that defiance would result in severe punitive action, and possibly their own death, they refuse the plainly immoral directive. The Torah tells us precisely the reason:

וַתִּירָאנָה הַמִּיּוֹלְדוֹת, אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים, וְלֹא עָשׂוּ, כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם; וַתַּחֲיֶינָה, אֶת-הַיְלָדִים⁹

The midwives feared the Lord, and they did not comply with the command of the King of Egypt, and they caused the children to live.

Fear of Heaven, in this instance, provides the explanation or an act of enormous moral courage, at the expense of self-interest.

Moving backwards, textually speaking, to the first time this term appears in the Torah, we find Avraham on the defensive, explaining to Avimelech, the Philistine monarch, why he misled him as to the nature of his relationship with Sarah. Avraham's response is candid:

וַיֹּאמֶר, אַבְרָהָם, כִּי אָמַרְתִּי רַק אִין-יִרְאֵת אֱלֹהִים, בְּמָקוֹם הַזֶּה; וַהֲרִגוּנִי, עַל-דִּבְרֵי אִשְׁתִּי¹⁰.

Avraham said [to Avimelech], I reasoned that there is no Fear of the Lord in this place, and they will kill me on the matter of my wife.

⁷ See, Hilkhote Yesodei Ha-Torah, ibid, where the Rambam fully integrates his presentation of these two mitzvot, suggesting the need for synthesis and interaction between these two poles of Avodat HaShem.

⁸ See Mishneh Torah, Hilkhote Teshuvah, Chapter 10, for Rambam's classical description of the love of God. Rambam's emphasis there on the paradigmatic role played by Avraham in manifesting the highest expressions of this virtue, based on the verse in Yeshayahu (אברהם אברהם) is noteworthy insofar as Avraham's status as a ירא אלוהים, as described extensively in this essay. Apparently, Avraham achieved the integration between אהבה and יראה which Rambam emphasized so extensively.

⁹ Shemot 1:17.

¹⁰ Bereishit 20:11.

In this context, Fear of Heaven, or more precisely, its absence, is associated with the failure to adhere to basic moral standards, and to in fact murder for the sake of one's own carnal gratification. That is, the absence of Fear of Heaven translates into the Philistines being willing to place immediate self-interest ahead of even the most basic standards of morality. It is, in this sense, perfectly consistent with the meaning of Fear of Heaven in the context of the midwives, who were unwilling to murder out of self-interest due to their Fear of Heaven.

Moving ahead to another instance in which Fear of Heaven is mentioned in Sefer Bereishit, we find Yosef releasing all of his brothers from a detention of some seventy two hours. Yosef has summarily accused his brothers of espionage, a crime punishable by death and had demanded that they demonstrate their innocence by sending one brother back to bring Binyamin from Canaan, as a means of corroborating their story concerning their identities. Had Yosef actually carried out this plan, it is possible that the remaining family members at home might even starve to death.

However, at this point, Yosef relents, and will inform them that they are all free to go, and that he will detain only one of them, while the rest return to their native land, with food critical to their survival, and with the intention of returning to Egypt with Binyamin, at which point the one detained brother (Shimon, in fact), will be released. In explaining his decision to free ten of the prisoners, along with the food which they will need to survive in the interim, Yosef explains:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי, זֹאת עֲשׂוּ וְחָיוּ; אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים, אֲנִי יִרָא¹¹

And Yosef said to them on the third day, do this and you will love, the Lord I do fear.

Once again, we find the term Fear of Heaven associated with a commitment to behave within the bounds of morality, not to kill summarily, as Yosef¹², as viceroy of Egypt surely could have, nor to imprison unnecessarily. Fear of Heaven means that one may not act capriciously, or arbitrarily, but, in such a manner which reflects an awareness of a Higher authority. It should equally be noted that Yosef

¹¹ Bereishit 42:18.

¹² A careful reading of the entire Yosef narrative from the thirty seventh chapter of Sefer Bereishit through the conclusion of the sefer clearly establishes that the notion of יראת אלוקים is actually the central motif of his story. A young, immature man who dreams, literally, of his own power learns, through enslavement and imprisonment, that indeed the Almighty is the only one who truly rules on this earth. The sheer number of times which Yosef, utilizes the term אלוקים, in renouncing his own powers, בלעדי, לי, בלעדי, הלא לאלקים פתרונים ספרו נא לי, בלעדי, אלוקים, as well as in the context of accepting the terrible suffering he endured, לא אתם שלחתם, ואתם חשבתם עלי רעה אלקים יענה את שלום פרעה, and finally, in requesting his reinternment in the Land of Israel, ואתם חשבתם עלי רעה אלקים חשבה לטובה, פקד יפקוד אלקים אתכם והעלייתם את עצמותי מזה אתכם, affirms our premise regarding the meaning of יראת אלוקים. It is an acknowledgement of the centrality of the Divine will, and a recognition of human limitation within that context. It is of particular significance for Yosef, who, in his earlier, less mature years, והוא נער, suffered from a highly exaggerated sense of self.

employs very similar language in refusing the advances of the wife of Potiphar, noting that consorting with her would indeed represent an affront to the Almighty, ¹³וַחֲטָאתִי לֵאלֹהִים.

If, as we have seen in the case of the midwives, Avimelech (by absence), and Yosef, Fear of Heaven is associated, in particular, with a refusal to shed innocent blood, (or commit other immoral acts, as was the case with the wife of Potiphar) then it would stand to reason that abundant Fear of Heaven would be to practice this virtue, quantitatively speaking, on a prodigious scale. This is precisely what we discover when we look at the only instance in Tanach in which someone is described as *extremely* God fearing, יִרְאֵה אֱתֵי ה' מְאֹד, Ovadiah¹⁴, chief of staff to the wicked monarchs, Achav and Izevel. As we learn in the Navi, when Izevel sought to murder all of the remaining prophets of the Lord, Ovadiah personally saved, and sustained, one hundred of them. The term מְאֹד with respect to qualifying the degree of Ovadiah's יִרְאֵה seems to me to have two distinct connotations: the number of individuals whom he was able to rescue, as well as the degree of personal risk he assumed in doing so in defiance of proven and known murderers.

Having defined יִרְאֵה שְׁמַיִם, or יִרְאֵה ה', as having the moral fortitude not to shed innocent blood despite have the power and self-interest to do so, we can now turn to the most famous, but also surely, the most challenging appearance of this virtue. At the Akeidah, Avraham, having clearly demonstrated his willingness to kill his own son at the Divine behest, though, of course, God would not allow for that willingness to be actualized, is told:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵל תְּשַׁלַּח יָדְךָ אֶל הַנֶּעֱר וְאֶל תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מֵאוֹמָה כִּי עֵתָה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי יִרְאֵה אֱלֹהִים אֶתָּה וְלֹא חֲשַׁכְתָּ אֶת בִּנְךָ אֶת יְחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי

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And [the Angel] said [to Avraham], do not send forth your hand against the child, and do not do anything to him, for I know now that you Fear the Lord, and you did not withhold your son, your single one, from me.

This is the most subtle, but probably also the most important, utilization of יִרְאֵה אֱלֹהִים. Unlike the midwives, the story of Avimelech, or Yosef and his brothers, Avraham's display of יִרְאֵה אֱלֹהִים was not his courage to do something we would instinctively recognize as moral, but, on the contrary, to do something from which Avraham, and the rest of us, would instantaneously recoil, for the sole reason that the Almighty has demanded it. In other words, יִרְאֵה אֱלֹהִים, which in all of the other contexts indicated a refusal to shed innocent blood, in this instance indicates precisely the opposite, if, and only if, it has been expressly demanded by the Higher authority who typically abhors the shedding of innocent blood.

¹³ Bereishit 39:9.

¹⁴ Melakhim I 18:3-4.

¹⁵ Bereishit 22:12.

Thus, we must define **יראת אלוקים**, in totality, as a willingness to suspend one's own judgment, or self-interest, in the face of Divine imperative. It is perhaps for this reason which Rambam affiliates **יראת שמיים**, as we saw above, with an appreciation of the chasm which separates God's wisdom from our own. One ought to be willing to suspend one's judgment in the face of the perfect intellect, **תמים דעות**.

It was this virtue which allowed the midwives to defy the powerful King of Egypt at the risk of their own lives. It was the absence of this virtue which convinced Avraham that the Philistines would kill him for their own pleasure. It was to this virtue which Yosef appealed to explain his release of his brothers from prison, with the food which they would need to survive. And, in what is a superficial paradox, it is precisely this virtue which allowed Avraham to suspend his own most basic instincts and judgment and prepare to slaughter his own beloved, innocent son.

In conclusion, however, if Fear of Heaven is essentially an orientation which places the Divine imperative at the center of all decision making, it seems to me that the Akeidah may establish one final point, one which relieves a great deal of the tension outlined above. While, in its purest form, Fear of Heaven means that one must be willing to suspend one's instincts towards compassion in the face of the Divine imperative, the very fact that God revealed that the Akeidah was a test, and that, of course, God did not desire that Yitzchak should actually be killed, surely has far reaching implications as well.

From the Akeidah and onwards, absent direct Divine revelation to the contrary, Fear of Heaven should be expected to align with our basic instinct towards morality, justice, and compassion. It remains a bulwark, as it was in the case of the midwives and Ovadiah, against plainly immoral behavior, even when engaging in such behavior is consistent with self-interest, or in Yosef's case, well within one's power. It replaces a pleasure seeking orientation, such as the prevailing code of conduct amongst Avimelech and the Philistines, with a lifelong search for actions which accord with Divine will. It moves man from the center to the periphery, and does precisely the opposite with God.

In our age of radical autonomy, where even religious circles have been permeated by a clear sense of anthropocentrism, leaving aside, to put the matter mildly, an undisciplined general culture, Fear of Heaven, is a decidedly countercultural force.

Yet, we need not be deterred. After all, our paragon of yirat shamayim is Avram Ha-Ivri, who stood apart from the entire world, fully resolute in his convictions. As his children, we are steeled by his example, and, concomitantly, stimulated by it to influence society around us.