

Shemot: The Meaning of the Fear of Heaven

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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 שמיים, otherwise referred to as fear of the Lord, יראת ה'. To cite just a few classical examples, 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, family values, and other important values is only considered successful if it was marked 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 does this term even mean, what are its properties, one may find providing anything approaching a precise answer quite elusive.

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 helpful attribute to possess so far as 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. 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.

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,

¹ Talmud Bavli, Masekhet Shabbat, 31b

² ibid

³ Ibid (31a)

⁴ Sefer Ha-Mitzvot, Mitzvot Aseh, 4.

⁵ Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah, 2:1-2.

⁶ Talmud Bavli, Masekhet Brachot 16b

⁷ See, Hilkhot 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, Hilkhot Teshuvah, Chapter 10, for Rambam's classical description of the love of God.

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 this week's Torah portion, 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 surreptitiously murder, and supervise the murder of, baby boys. 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:

וַתִּירָאן הַמִּילֵדוֹת, אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים, וְלֹא עָשׂוּ, כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵן מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם; וַתַּחַיֶּינָן, אֶת-הַיְלָדִים (שמות א:יז)

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. (Shemot 1:17)

Fear of Heaven, in this instance, provides the explanation or an act of enormous moral courage, at the expense of self-interest. Moving backwards, for a moment, 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 אֵין-יִרְאֵת אֱלֹהִים, בְּמָקוֹם הַזֶּה; וְהִרְגִנִּי, עַל-דְּבַר אִשְׁתִּי.
(בראשית כ:יא)

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. (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 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 the final 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 עָשׂוּ וְחִי; אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים, אֲנִי יִרָא
(בראשית מב:יח)

*And Yosef said to them on the third day, do this and you will love, the Lord I do fear
(Bereishit 42:18)*

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 Yosef, as viceroy of Egypt surely might 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.

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, then it would stand to reason that abundant Fear of Heaven would be to practice this virtue 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, ירא את ה' מאד, Ovadiah⁹, 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.

Having defined יראת שמיים, or, יראת 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 הַנֶּעַר וְאֶל תַּעֲשׂ לּוֹ מֵאוֹמָה כִּי עֵתָה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי יִרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶתְּךָ וְלֹא חָשַׁכְתָּ אֶת בֶּן אֶת
יְחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי (בראשית כב:יב)

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 (Bereishit 22:12)

⁹ Sefer Melakhim I 18:3-4.

This is the most subtle, but probably also the most important, utilization of יראת אלוקים. Unlike the midwives, the story of Avimelech, or Yosef and his brothers, Avraham's display of יראת אלוקים 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, only because God demanded it. In other words, יראת אלוקים, 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.

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, Fear of Heaven, is a decidedly countercultural force.