

## *The Proper Place of Fear in Religion*

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Do you know that human beings have been deliberately scaring themselves for many thousands of years? We love to be scared...Long before the multi-million dollar horror movie industry, and long before Stephen King ever wrote a book or anyone jumped off a bungee platform, ancient humans were engaging in their own form of extreme sports, like cliff diving in warmer climates, and sleighing down snow covered mountains in colder places. Many cultures tell scary stories, often around a camp fire, usually at night, and typically before some harrowing event or journey. We love to be scared, and science has discovered that when we are, our brains are bathed in adrenaline, and endorphins, and dopamine. When it's all over, like when you step off of the terrifying roller coaster ride or land safely after sky diving or exit the haunted house, you feel an incredible rush of accomplishment; I did it! I survived! The more trained and experienced we are at those daring acts, the more free we are to enjoy them as well. Most of us don't like to truly be in a position of life threatening danger though. The fear we prefer is controlled, deliberate, and even fabricated. So what do we make of the words that appear in the traditional siddur which we are instructed to say each morning from the book of Psalms:

*Reishit chochma yirat Hashem: Wisdom begins with the fear of God.*<sup>1</sup>

For some reason that line does not appear in our siddur, and I suspect that it is because the idea of fearing God does not exactly gel with liberal Jewish theology. We're comfortable with a loving God, a compassionate God, a caring God, but a God who is to be feared, that's a bit outmoded; only *Haredim*—you know the word 'Haredi' means a trembler—only people like that, people whose religion makes them tremble, talk about the fear of God; People who believe in a punitive God, a stern, judgmental God. So we're all ready to go on that crazy Apocalypse roller coaster at Six Flags, or drop six stories in the Howlin' Tornado at Great Wolf Lodge, but we are not interested in anything having to do with the fear of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 111:10

Now I want to acknowledge something here. It's not entirely clear that when the Torah speaks of *yir'ah* that it necessarily means fear, as in terror or fright. *Yir'ah* has a variety of meanings, and what the Torah probably intends more than fear is awe; A sense of grandeur and amazement at something so magnificent and inexplicable. That's why people who are not necessarily religious exclaim "Oh my God" when they see something amazing in nature. That's *yirah*, right there. Being in the presence of or having the awareness of something that is so phenomenally great.

But sometimes that entails a little bit of good old fashioned fear too. In our parasha the Torah refers to a particular group of God-fearing Egyptians! *Hayarei et d'var Adonai mei'avdei Paro...* It seems that after the plagues of blood, frogs, lice, insects, pestilence, and boils, and just before the next devastating plague of hail certain Egyptians were downright terrified of the God who was behind all this—notice, not terrified of Moses or Aaron, but terrified of God.<sup>2</sup> Were they in awe of God's wonders and power, no doubt, but that awe was frightening enough that they pulled all their animals inside their living rooms so that the animals wouldn't get pelted by falling chunks of ice from the sky. It is a fine line indeed between awe and fear. And I want to argue today that fear is an essential ingredient to any healthy religious identity. Because along with the sense of awe and grandeur that fear produces, there is another critical perspective that comes along with fear, and that is humility. No one who fears God can claim to fully know and understand God. No one who fears God can assume with absolute certainty that what they are doing is without a doubt the will of God. No one who possesses a healthy sense of *yirat shamayim* can say that their interpretation of sacred texts or religious obligations is absolutely correct to the exclusion of all others. That's why the siddur wants us to begin every day by reciting *reishit chochma yirat Hashem...* Wisdom begins with the fear of God or put differently, wisdom begins by acknowledging its limits; wisdom begins by admitting that some things in this universe are beyond our grasp or ability to comprehend. When you acknowledge that, then you can begin to truly learn, and you can truly be pious.

Last week, we read of two other people who were possessed of *yirat Shamayim*. Two women, Shifra and Puah the midwives who refused to carry out Pharaoh's barbaric order to murder Jewish male babies as soon as they were born, and why? The Torah says: "*Va'tirena* (that's

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 9:20

*yir'ah) ha'meyaldot et ha'Elohim ve'lo asu ka'asher dibeir aleihen melech Mitzrayim."* **Because they feared God,**<sup>3</sup> they did not do what the king of Egypt commanded them to do. This first recorded act of civil disobedience is attributed to *yirat shamayim!*

Contrast that to Pharaoh and his actions. Pharaoh was considered god on earth; in life, Pharaoh was the reincarnation of the great Egyptian god Horus; in death, Pharaoh became the god Osiris. As a god in human form, he possessed immense, tremendous power. Though part of pharaoh's job was to serve as the intermediary and spokesman of the people before the rest of the gods, I don't think he was possessed of very much *yirah*... the magicians and servants of the pharaoh in the exodus story become terrified of the God of Israel, but Pharaoh, even while being pestered by the plagues, never admits much terror at all. And unlike the midwives who are convinced of a sense of moral justice in the universe, pharaoh the god feels that he can do anything he wants to anyone he wants. And that is a story that would repeat throughout history in every place where human beings claimed either to be deities themselves or the exclusive interpreters of the deity. Roman Emperors were considered deities, with their own priesthoods and festivals, temples and altars dedicated solely to them. When they proclaimed or commanded that something be done, it was tantamount to divine revelation. There's even a word for this that comes from that cultural reality, *apotheosis*: The process of elevating one to divine status! In the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, Pope Urban II mobilized 100,000 people to take up arms in the First Crusade, with three simple words: "God wills it." That was followed by promises of reward in the afterlife, including a guarantee of eternal salvation to those who died in the struggle against the infidel."<sup>4</sup> Not a lot of *yirat shamayim* shown by the infallible pope...but a tremendous amount of religious hubris that resulted in the torture and deaths of tens of thousands of people across the European continent. So too with the Ayatollahs whose power is also absolute and infallible, and even in the cults of secular leaders like Stalin, Hitler, the Kim Jongs of Korea, or Mao of China...they decreed what was right and wrong, holy and unholy, permitted and prohibited, sacred and profane. And no one dared challenged these leaders who claimed this irreproachable status above everyone and everything else.

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<sup>3</sup> Exodus 1:17

<sup>4</sup> Carroll, James. *Constantine's Sword*, pp. 239-240.

Into this unholy mix comes our Torah, which says that even the prophet par excellence, even Moses to whom God speaks in the most unmediated ways, is not permitted to know everything there is to know about God. Stand in the cleft of the rock, God tells Moses, and you can see my back...but even you can't bear total witness to all that I am.<sup>5</sup> Job is finally assuaged in his protracted argument with God when God tells him, look, you can't possibly imagine what it is to be God...you weren't there when I created the world, you don't have the faintest idea what it is to be Me.<sup>6</sup> Over and over Judaism reiterates a sense of *yirat shamayim* as a critical component to faith. If you have a healthy sense of fear and awe, then you also have a sense of humility and modesty when it comes to proclaiming truth. If radical Muslims internalized *yirat shamayim*, they could never commit the heinous acts they do, because they would have to question whether the God of the universe would really demand such egregious behavior. *Yirat Shamayim* is a check against radicalism, against fundamentalism, against extremism, and against any uncompromising behavior allegedly done in the name of God.

Contrary to all the apologetics that the terrorists are not really Muslims, or their acts do not represent true Islam—have you noticed how many politicians and pundits have become experts in Islamic theology? Did they all go out and get PhD's in Islamic studies so that they could interpret what truly is and is not legitimate Islam? When they say these things, they unfortunately give Islam a pass and an excuse not to deal with the fanaticism that is very much a Muslim problem. One of the most important stories of these past weeks was when the President of Egypt, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi went to Al-Azhar University in Cairo, the Harvard of Islamic scholarship, and told a room full of Imams that they had better revolutionize Islam. “You imams (prayer leaders) are responsible before Allah.” He told them. “The entire world—I say it again, the entire world—is waiting for your next move because this *umma* [the entire Muslim world] is being torn, it is being destroyed, it is being lost—and it is being lost by our own hands.” He went on to talk about all the violence and hatred that is preached in mosques and warned that the world was being pitted against them because of their irresponsible rhetoric and the terrible outcomes it produces. I only hope that al-Sisi lives to see the revolution he calls for!

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<sup>5</sup> Exodus 33:22-23

<sup>6</sup> Job 38:4

Back in our parasha, the *yirah*, the fear that the Egyptians felt after living through plague after devastating plague caused them to do something rational and responsible. They moved their flocks inside so they would be spared from future plagues. I hope that the terrible events of this past week will inspire people throughout the world to a similar rational, responsible course...to once and for all condemn fanaticism, and because of *yirat shamayim*, a true sense of awe and fear and humility, begin a process of serious reformation. In the words of the last verses of Ecclesiastes:

*Sof davar ha'kol nishma*, the sum of the matter when all is said and done, *Et ha'Elohim y'ra v'et mitzvotav sh'mor*: Revere God and observe His commandments. *Ki zeh kol ha'adam*...this applies to all the people of the world.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:14