

Parashat Lech L'cha (Genesis 12:1- 17:27)

Middah: אַוֶּה | Yirah | Awe

Study Source: The Mussar Torah Commentary, ed. Block

Summary of Lech L'cha

- Abram, Sarai, and Lot go to Canaan. (12:1-9)
- Famine takes them to Egypt, where Abram identifies Sarai as his sister in order to save his life. (12:10-20)
- Abram and Lot separate. Lot is taken captive, and Abram rescues him. (13:1-14:24)
- Abram has a son, Ishmael, with his Egyptian maidservant, Hagar. (16:1-16)
- God establishes a covenant with Abram. The sign of this covenant is circumcision on the eighth day following a male baby's birth. (17:1-27)

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Grandeur, Heschel writes, fills us with yirah (אַוֶּה, “awe”). The potential to feel that awe, however, must be nurtured within us. We are easily distracted by our own thoughts, daily worries, or concerns, and we miss the moment.

“Awe,” writes Alan Morinis, “is a natural human response to an overwhelming profound experience. . . . But only an inner instrument that has been polished and honed will find just as much awe in less dramatic situations. . . . Cultivate the capacity to feel awe and the whole world becomes awesome.”

As human beings, we must learn that God’s presence is everywhere—found in the grandeur of the Grand Canyon and reflected back to us when we bear witness to the image of God that is within the vessel of another human soul. Morinis writes, “However it may come to us, a moment of awe gives us a small taste of the cosmic mystery, and an intuitive intimation of the divine. Awe does not protest phenomenal reality; rather, it offers direct affirmation of the eternal that lies within the worldly.” When we nurture awe, we deepen our connection to God, to the oneness of the universe, which helps us recognize the godliness in all of Creation.

Why cultivate awe? According to Heschel, awe of God is the beginning of wisdom and is “an intuition for the creaturely dignity of all things and their preciousness to God.” In addition to being in awe of God’s presence and God’s

role in creating the natural wonders of the world, Heschel reminds us that we are to behave in a way that recognizes God's presence in every person's soul. Could this be what God meant when telling Abram, Veh'yeih brachah (וְהִיָּה בְרָכָה), "Be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2)? Being a blessing is the consummate act of yirah in balance. When we are a blessing, we are aware of the divine presence contained within the mystery of existence. Awe leads to wisdom, which leads to holy behavior. How do we cultivate such awe? We place ourselves in moments when we can become captivated and mesmerized. We notice the sunsets, behold the rainbows, and are captivated by the majesty of a leaf budding in the spring or a bee buzzing in a flower. By restraining cognitive analysis, which causes us to consider only parts of the whole, we open awe's pathway. To put it simply, we stop thinking and start feeling.

Additionally, we appreciate the divinity within every living soul. There is a story about Rabbi Nachman Kossover, a great Chasidic preacher who always perceived the divine name before him by seeing the divinity in the faces of those in his synagogue. Times changed and he found himself as a merchant in the marketplace, where he could no longer concentrate on God's presence. He hired a special assistant to remind him of the godliness of every soul. In the midst of the chaos of the marketplace, he would look at the face of his assistant, and then Reb Nachman would remember God's name. As we walk through nature or the marketplace, let us notice the wonder. As we look upon the face of another, we can behold God's presence. When we can perceive the divine seeds, even the mundane can become magical.

Genesis 12:1-3

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבְּיַת אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ
 אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאֶךָ: וְאָעֲשֶׂה לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְאַבְרָכְךָ וְאֶגְדָּלְהָ שְׂמִי וְהָיָה בְרָכָה: וְאַבְרָכָה
 מְבָרְכֶיךָ וּמְקַלְלֶיךָ אָאֵר וְנִבְרָכוּ בְּךָ כָּל מְשֻׁפָּחוֹת הָאָדָמָה:

¹ The Lord said to Abram, go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.

² *I will make of you a great nation,
 And I will bless you;
 I will make your name great,
 And you shall be a blessing.*

³ *I will bless those who bless you
 And curse him that curses you;
 And all the families of the earth
 Shall bless themselves by you."*

⁴ Abram went forth as the Lord had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. ⁵ Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they arrived in the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.

⁷ The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "I will assign this land to your heirs." And he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him.

Genesis 17:1-8

וַיְהִי אַבְרָם בְּרֶשֶׁתְּשָׁעִים שָׁנָה וַתִּשַׁע שָׁנָיִם וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו
אֲנִי־אֵל שְׂדֵי הַתְּהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי וְהָיָה תָמִים: וְאַתְּנָה בְרִיתִי בֵינִי וּבֵינְךָ וְאַרְבָּה
אוֹתְךָ בְּמֵאָד מְאֹד: וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָם עַל־פָּנָיו וַיְדַבֵּר אֵתוֹ אֱלֹהִים לֵאמֹר: אֲנִי הִנֵּה
בְרִיתִי אִתְּךָ וְהָיִיתָ לְאָב הַמּוֹן גּוֹיִם: וְלֹא־יִקְרָא עוֹד אֶת־שְׁמֹךָ אַבְרָם וְהָיָה
שְׁמֹךָ אַבְרָהָם כִּי אֲבִ־הַמּוֹן גּוֹיִם נִתְּתִיךָ: וְהִפְרִתִי אִתְּךָ בְּמֵאָד מְאֹד וַיִּנְתְּתִיךָ
לְגוֹיִם וּמְלָכִים מִמֶּךָ יֵצְאוּ: וְהִקְמַתִי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי בֵינִי וּבֵינְךָ וּבֵין זָרְעֶךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ
לְדֹרֹתָם לְבְרִית עוֹלָם לְהַיּוֹת לְךָ לְאֱלֹהִים וּלְזָרְעֶךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ: וְנִתְּתִי לְךָ וּלְזָרְעֶךָ
אַחֲרֶיךָ אֶת אֶרֶץ מִגְרִיֶּךָ אֶת כָּל־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן לְאֶחְזֶזֶת עוֹלָם וְהָיִיתִי לָהֶם
לְאֱלֹהִים:

¹ When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am El Shaddai. Walk in My ways and be blameless. ² I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous."

³ Abram threw himself on his face; and God spoke to him further, ⁴ "As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵ And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fertile, and make nations of you; and kings shall come forth from you. ⁷ I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come. ⁸ I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God."

Commentary: The Mussar Torah Commentary

Parashat Lech L'cha invites us to accompany Abram on his journey as we watch him cultivate awe within his soul. Walking alongside Abram, we witness his response to both grand and mundane moments. [...]

“The Eternal said to Abram, ‘Lech l’cha—Go forth from your land, your birthplace, your father’s house, to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and it shall be a blessing’” (Genesis 12:1–2). Completely awed by the moment, Abram responds with silence, contemplating the outcome, hoping that the encounter with the divine voice and the sacred word would endure far beyond the spoken moment. Heschel writes, “When we stand in awe, our lips do not demand speech, knowing that if we spoke, we would deprave ourselves. In such moments talk is an abomination. All we want is to pause, to be still, that the moment may last. . . . The meaning of the things we revere is overwhelming and beyond the grasp of our understanding.” Abram’s silence demonstrates the awe within him being perfectly in balance. We would expect Abram to respond by reaching out to his beloved Sarai or his nephew Lot to share with them the grandeur he just experienced and the awe he felt. Abram’s silence, an expression of awe, permits him to recognize God’s presence in his life, whereas the spoken word would have minimized that awe-inspiring moment of hearing God’s voice.

When Abram finally does speak, after his journey, he addresses Sarai. “Look, now—I know what a beautiful woman you are! So when the Egyptians see you, and say: ‘This is his wife,’ they may kill me; but you they shall keep alive. Please say then that you are my sister, so that on your account it may go well for me, and that my life may be spared because of you” (Genesis 12:11–13). Abram’s yirah is no longer in balance. God had already reassured him that his descendants would possess the land. How quickly Abram has forgotten this promise! His yirah is misdirected toward Pharaoh’s power rather than toward God’s. Had Abram been able to direct his awe properly in this less dramatic situation, he might have behaved differently.

Abraham’s journey to cultivating awe continues in Parashat Vayeira. The psychological, intellectual, and ethical implications of the Akeidah are overwhelming. When God asks Abraham to bring his son as an offering, we wonder how he could have willingly acquiesced. Reading this through the lens of awe, perhaps we might wonder if Abraham held too much awe for God and not enough for his son or fellow human beings. His readiness to offer his son as a korban (“sacrifice”) teaches that his yirah motivates him to act mindlessly according to God’s will. Only later does Abraham bring his yirah back into

balance, the angel even mentioning the middah when calling to him, telling him not to harm Isaac: “[The angel] then said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the lad; do nothing to him; for now I know that you are y’rei Elohim—one who fears God, as you did not withhold your son, your only one, from Me” (Genesis 22:12). Abraham restores balance to his yirah when he is able to behold both God’s presence and the value of his son’s life in the same moment.

At the conclusion of Parashat Lech L’cha, God changes Abram’s name to Abraham and Sarai’s to Sarah, establishing a covenant with them (Genesis 17:1–8, 17:15). A Chasidic teaching illuminates the addition of the letter hei (ה) within Abraham and Sarah’s new names as an allusion to Creation. Torah explains the story of the heavens and the earth as b’hibaram, “they were created” (Genesis 2:4). Chasidic wisdom interprets this to mean b’hei b’ra-am (בראם = ברא אותם), “God created everything with the letter hei,” teaching us that the addition of the hei to Abraham and Sarah’s names cultivates a sense of awe for the divine presence contained within grandeur of Creation.

Our Middah in (other) Jewish Text

Genesis 22:12

(12) And he said, “Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you **fear** God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me.”

בראשית כ"ב:י"ב

(יב) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים לְאַבְרָהָם אַל תִּשָּׂחַ אֶת יָדְךָ עַל הַיֵּלֶד וְעַל הַיְעָר וְאַל תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי אֵינִי עֹתֶה יְדַעְתִּי כִּי יִרְאֵה אֱלֹהִים אֶתְּךָ וְלֹא חָשַׁבְתָּ אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי:

Deuteronomy 6:10-15

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that God swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to assign to you [...]take heed that you do not forget the LORD who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. **Revere** only the LORD your God and worship God alone, and swear only by God’s name.

דברים ו':י'-ט"ו

וְהָיָה כִּי יְבִיאֲכֶם אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֶלְהֵיכֶם אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלְיַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר לְךָ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר הוֹצִיאֲכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם מִבְּיַת עַבְדִּים: אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם תִּירָא וְאֶת־תַּעֲבֹד וּבְשֵׁמוֹ תִשָּׁבַע:

Pirkei Avot 3:17

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said: Where there is no Torah, there is no right conduct; where there is no right conduct, there is no Torah. Where there is no wisdom there is no **fear of God**; where there is no **fear of God**, there is no wisdom.

Mishneh Torah, Foundations of the Torah 2:1-2

It is mandatory to love and **fear** this Glorified and Awe-inspiring God, for it is said: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God" (Deut. 6,5); and as it is said: "The Lord thy God thou shalt fear." (Ibid. 6, 13). But how may one discover the way to love and **fear** God? When man will reflect concerning God's works, and great and wonderful creatures, and will behold through them God's wonderful, matchless and infinite wisdom, he will spontaneously be filled with love, praise and exaltation and become possessed of a great longing to know the Great Name...

Questions for Discussion

- Where do you see this *middah* of *yirah* at work within Torah? Within Jewish texts, tradition, practice, and culture?
- What encounters with people or nature have inspired awe within you? How do you see God's presence within that creation or person?

Practice for the *Middah* of *Yirah* from the MTC

Go on a nature walk (perhaps on Shabbat). Look around at the beauty; when you see something that gives you a sense of wonder, spend time appreciating what you see. You might say: *Mah gadlu maasecha Adonai*, "How amazing are Your works, Adonai"!

משנה אבות ג' י"ז

רבי אלעזר בן עזריה
אומר, אם אין תורה, אין
דרך ארץ. אם אין דרך
ארץ, אין תורה. אם אין
חכמה, אין יראת ה'. אם אין
יראה, אין חכמה.

משנה תורה, הלכות יסודי

התורה ב' א'-ב'

האל הנכבד והנורא הזה מצוה
לאהבו וליראה אותו שנאמר
(דברים ו ה) "ואהבת את ה'
אלהיך". ונאמר (דברים ו יג)
"את ה' אלהיך תירא": והיאך
היא הדרך לאהבתו ויראתו.
בשעה שיתבונן האדם במעשיו
וברואיו הנפלאים הגדולים
ויראה מהן חכמתו שאין לה ערך
ולא קץ מיד הוא אוהב ומשבח
ומפארו ומתאנה תאנה גדולה
לידע השם הגדול.

Haftarah for Parashat Lech L'cha – Isaiah 40:27-41:16 (41:8-16)

41:8 But you, Israel, My servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
Seed of Abraham My friend —
9 You whom I drew from the ends of the earth
And called from its far corners,
To whom I said: You are My servant;
I chose you, I have not rejected you —
10 Fear not, for I am with you,
Be not frightened, for I am your God;
I strengthen you and I help you,
I uphold you with My victorious right hand.
11 Shamed and chagrined shall be
All who contend with you;
They who strive with you
Shall become as naught and shall perish.
12 You may seek, but shall not find
Those who struggle with you;
Less than nothing shall be
The men who battle against you.
13 For I the Lord am your God,
Who grasped your right hand,
Who say to you: Have no fear;
I will be your help.
14 Fear not, O worm Jacob,
O men of Israel:
I will help you
— *declares the Lord* —
I your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.
15 I will make of you a threshing board,
A new thresher, with many spikes;
You shall thresh mountains to dust,
And make hills like chaff.
16 You shall winnow them
And the wind shall carry them off;
The whirlwind shall scatter them.
But you shall rejoice in the Lord,
And glory in the Holy One of Israel.