Yirat Shamayim: Just Open Our Eyes

Have you ever had the experience of a friend or family member asking you to do them just one favor, and that just one favor turned into a second favor? Pretty soon, you were doing a whole lot of favors that you never expected to be doing and definitely did not agree to at the outset.

I am reminded of that situation in this morning’s Parsha when Moshe says to Bnai Yisrael:

VAIta Yisrael mah Hashem Elokecha Shoel Me’imach
Now, Israel, what does G-d want from you?
Ki Im L’Yirah et Hashem Elokecha- ONLY to have Yirat Hashem
AND To Go in all His ways
And to Love Him, and to serve Him with all your heart and your soul
AND to observe all the commandments of Hashem and His decrees

A pretty extensive list- what happened to the just one thing that Hashem was asking of us, namely Yirat Hashem?

The Gemara in Brachot understood that Yirat Hashem is the primary request that G-d has for us, while the rest of the list contains details that come from (or that lead to) the ultimate goal of Yirat Hashem. But this understanding forces the Gemara to ask a different question: Atu Yirat Shamayim Milta Zutrata Hi? Is Yirat Shamayim a minor achievement whereby Moshe can downplay it as no big deal (KI IM)? The Talmud answers: Iyn, L’Gabbai Moshe- Milta Zutrata Hi. That for Moshe having Yirat Shamayim is in fact a minor achievement.

Some commentators have suggested that the humility of Moshe was so natural and so ingrained that he honestly felt that if he could do it, anyone could. However, such an approach leaves many of us uneasy, as it causes one to wonder whether part of Moshe’s character was a detachment from reality or an inability to appreciate the differences between the leader and the masses.

What we need is not a different interpretation of Moshe’s thought processes, but rather a different understanding of Yirat Shamayim. The word Yirah is derived from the word that means to “flow from the gut”- perceive or recognize that one is in the presence of greatness. However, Rabbi Avraham Eliyahu Kaplan in his essay “B’Ikvot Hayirah” suggests that Yirat Hashem is related in concept to the word Re’iyah: to see. This is evident from the verse in Beshalach that we recite daily as part of the Az Yashir prayer: Vayar Yisrael, Vayiru Haam et Hashem.

(Just a few pesukim later in our Parsha, Moshe reminds the People of their responsibilities utilizing the word in both ways: First: Et Hashem Elokecha Tira- fear G-d. Then in the next verse, Moshe reminds Bnai Yisrael: All of the miracles and wonders “Asher Ra’u Einecha”- that your eyes saw.)

Yirat Hashem is obtained by seeing G-d. Everywhere. And in everything. By appreciating that no aspect of our lives is devoid of the Divine. Although fear and reverence may be a desired outcome, the process by which that is achieved is through Re’iyah, developing a clearer vision of how G-d operates in the world and in every facet of our lives. That is how we should understand the Talmud in Berachot when it says that Hakol Biydei Shamayim Chutz Miyirat Shamayim. Hashem can inject Himself in all facets of our life, but it is entirely up to us to perceive Him.

Once we begin to see how G-d is operating in our lives on a daily ongoing basis, we are called upon to foster an appreciation of this reality. That is why the Talmud learns from our pasuk in Ekev the imperative of reciting 100 blessings every day. One concrete way to foster this clear vision of G-dliness in our lives is to recognize Hashem’s role throughout our day by reciting brachot.

And once we train ourselves to see how G-d operates in the world we must then emulate His ways, Lalechet B’chol Derachav, as Moshe seems to be saying is a natural outgrowth of Yirat Hashem. We are called upon to see beyond ourselves and to act with alacrity and compassion when others are in need. Just as G-d takes no bribes (judges with integrity and honesty) and is particularly concerned with protecting the most vulnerable of society (the stranger, widow and orphan) so too must we in our quest to achieve Yirat Hashem.

When the Talmud says that Yirat Shamayim is a Milta Zutrata, a small matter, we need not explain that this description applies only to someone of Moshe’s stature. For Yirat Shamayim flows from an appreciation of G-d’s presence in our lives; and a mandate to know His ways to emulate them, then the path towards Yirat Hashem is indeed a small, yet critically important step- we need to open our eyes.