THE MEANING OF FEAR

4th in Series of Jewish Meanings

I

The "Fear of G-d" is to modern man one of the most mysterious of religious concepts. First, he asks, why should I be afraid of G-d? He is good, isn't He? And secondly, how can I be afraid of a Being whom I cannot see, hear, or feel?

Both questions can, of course, be easily answered. First, while G-d is good, He is also just; and since man does sin, he should be frightened when considering the consequences of his actions and the punishment G-d ministers. While G-d should not always be conceived of as a stern master, He should also not always be thought of as a sugar daddy. And, as for the second question, G-d is very real despite His invisibility. And perhaps because He is in a large measure unknown is He to be feared.

But whatever answers we may offer, the questions are intelligent, and they point to the fact that we must try to understand the real Jewish meaning of Fear. Perhaps then we can eliminate the reasons for all these questions.

II

The first point we must make is this: There are two ways of expressing the Fear of G-d, or YIRAS SHAMAYIM. The RISHONIM, or great Jewish thinkers of the Middle ages, classify them as YIRAS HA'ONESH - "Fear of Punishment", which is what most people understand by "Fear" - and YIRAS HA'HISROMEMUSS - "Fear of Uplifting", or, in one word, Reverence. And it is this second type of Fear of G-d, Reverence or YIRAS HA'HISROMEMUS, which is the preferred and distinctly Jewish type of Fear.

YIRAS HA'ONESH means being terrified by the tortures of Hell; YIRAS HA'HISROMEMUS means being inspired by the beauty of the Heavens. Fear of Punishment means being frightened by the unknown dangers that lie ahead; Reverence means being awed by the challenge of the good life. The Fear of Punishment means being constantly aware of the Devils in Life; the Fear that is Reverence means being constantly thrilled by the Angels in Life. Fear of Punishment sees Sin as Dangerous; Reverence sees it as disgusting. Fear
of Punishment means being horrified at the destructive powers of an H-bomb; Reverence means being uplifted by considering its constructive powers.

Both are important religious attitudes, and both are complementary. But Reverence is what is really meant by the Jew when he says "YIRAH". It was reverence which filled the soul of that G-d fearing poet of holiness, King David, when he looked up upon the heavens and was so moved, so inspired by the sight he beheld that he exclaimed: "HA'/bashayim Mesaprim kvod el umaaseh yadav magid ha'rákha - "The heavens exclaim the glory of G-d, and the Firmament reveals the work of His hands". It is reverence which moves even the most hard-bitten cynic to exclaim "O my G-d" when viewing a majestic sunset as the western skies bathe a blazing sun in an aurora of celestial colors. It was reverence, too, which led a near-genius to tap out on a telegraph key the first words ever officially relayed, "What hath G-d wrought".

I wonder how many people know where those famous words come from. They are the English translation of the Hebrew ha'ash pa'al el, and the quotation comes from the Book of Job. And interestingly, it is this same Job who is described as tera blokim vesar me'raj - a G-d fearing man who eschewed evil. Job, you will remember, was the man whose piety was tested by a series of terrible misfortunes and heart-rending tragedies. Job began to complain against Divine Fate, and he began, in his misery, to question G-d's justice.

When, at the end of the Book of Job, G-d appears out of the whirlwind and wants to restore Job's fear of G-d, He does not do so by threatening him. He does not warn him of the punishment He will mete out or of the reward Job could otherwise have received. G-d does not frighten him. For G-d to Job is not a bogey-man, but a Holy, Sublime Being in whose Presence man must bow his head and keep his silence out of sheer reverence. What does G-d tell Job? - He tells him of the wonders of Creation - aiphon hayisah be'yasdi aretz - "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" G-d stresses the complexity of the world of Nature - Light and Dark, the raging
seas, the stars, snow and hail, the cycle of the seasons, mountains and valleys, the dew and the grass, the keys to Life and Death, the myriad of different types of animal and water life, the secret of birth and reproduction, the moral order of the world. Job's entire being quivers as he hears G-d's voice saying: "Knowest thou the laws of the heavens? ... Can'st thou bring forth the constellations of the Zodiac, each in its own season? ... Who hath put wisdom in the dark clouds, or who has given understanding to the bright meteors? ... Who ordains the skies with wisdom, or who empties out the bottles of heaven ...? Dost thou hunt for the lioness her prey, and suppliest thou the food for her young lions? ... Who provides for the raven his provision, when his young ones cry unto G-d, and wander about for lack of food?" Such words can shake a man to the roots of his existence and fill a man with fear—not the fear of punishment, but the fear of reverence. And so it is that at the very end, Job answers and says: YADATI KI KOL TUCHAL ... LACHEN HIGADETI VE'LO AVIN; NIFLACS MIMENI VE'LO EDA - "I acknowledge that thou art able to do everything, .... Truly have I spoken of what I understood not; of things which I understood not ..."

This, my friends, is true YIRAH - reverence! And how interesting therefore, that when the Bible, in this weeks Sidra, tells of the G-d-fearing Egyptians - HAYAREH ES DVAR HA'SHEM ME'AVDEI PAROH - saving themselves from the plague of hail-stones, that the Rabbis of the Jerusalem Talmud identify Job as one of those G-d-fearing Egyptians. For Job was a man of Reverence, and no man of reverence could fail to be impressed by the miracles G-d was performing in Egypt.

III. And yet such fear, such reverence is not sufficient. The reaction of any person to a miracle, to a marvelous display of natural phenomena, to great and beholde scenes, is naturally that of reverence. It is a natural and spontaneous, almost reflex, reaction. And while this is a very good thing, it is not sufficient. David, in Tehillim, speaks of a sort of fear or reverence which must be learnt, studied, developed and cultivated.
YIRAS HA'SHEM ALAMEDCHEM - "The fear of G-d will I teach you". Which leads us to our second point: That every man must try to learn a very special, more difficult, kind of reverence for G-d.

And what I mean is this: it is not enough to be inspired to reverence by some special and extraordinary event. We should not wait for a vision of Old Faithful or the Aurora Borealis or the Atom Bomb's mushroom cloud, before saying "What hath G-d wrought". We have got to learn to respond in that same way to the ordinary, prosaic, everyday affairs of life. For, indeed, the ordinary is really extra-ordinary, as the prosaic is poetic, and the everyday is a rare miracle. Were we but to open our eyes and look about us carefully, we could find cause for awe and reverence in something so simple, let us say, in a drop of water. We would be amazed by the obvious fact that here is matter which we can see through; it doesn't block our vision. Wonderful, isn't it? You cannot see through wood or iron or milk, but you can see through water. We would be awe-struck upon realizing that the number of molecules or smallest particles of water, is more than man can count - so much so, that if all the molecules in a teaspoonful of water became as large as drops, there would be enough water to fill any one of the Great Lakes. We would be galvanized by religious feeling upon considering that these bits of water are really made up of minute particles of two gases so small that we could never hope to see them, and travelling at extraordinary speeds powered by electrical forces too tiny to be measured individually. We would be dumbfounded by the discovery that scientists haven't the faintest idea as to knowledge as to what holds these little particles together in compact units. And, finally, if we were to look at this drop of water under a microscope our souls would be flooded with love and delight and fear and reverence for G-d, at the sight of all these queer creatures living at their own pace in their own world right in this one drop of water.
And yet this is only one homey example of how ordinary, run-of-the-mill things which we meet up with regularly every day and every moment can be the stuff from which true religious reverence is made. We have not mentioned machines and gadgets, but we have not mentioned that amazing mechanism called the human mind, or human emotions, or thousands of other matters. Certainly, therefore, there is enough in one ordinary day to charge man with the electricity of reverence, and make of him a YERAI SHAMAYIM. And this can be accomplished — but there must be a conscious effort to do so; it must be studied and prepared for and cultivated. "YIRAS HA'SHEM ALAMEDCHEM" — "The fear of G-d will I teach you."

And who knows but that perhaps in this very matter lay the superiority of Moses as recorded in this week’s Sidra — At the very beginning of the portion, G-d appears to Moses and tells him: VA’ER' A EL AVRAHAM EL YITZCHAK VE’EL YAakov BE'EL SHADDAI, USHEM HA'SHEM LO NODATI IAHEM — "I appeared unto Abraham and Isaac and Jacob by the name of EL SHADDAI (G-d the Almighty); but by My name YUD-KAY-VAV-KAY was I not made known to them". These two names of G-d, EL SHADDAI and YUD-KAY-VAV-KAY, really represent two different ways of achieving the fear of G-d, or Reverence. EL SHADDAI, which is translated as "G-d the Almighty", means just that — G-d as revealed in might and power and strength, G-d as He is understood as a result of miracles and extraordinary events. And, as the Torah indicates, the Patriarchs arrived at an understanding of and Reverence for G-d through these attributes of might and miracle. Abraham beholds a vision of G-d after the cataclysmic destruction of Sodom and Ammorah. This very special event reveals to Abraham G-d’s greatness and instills in him a feeling of reverence. According to the Rabbis, Abraham first conceived of G-d when, as a young man, he saw a BIRAH G'DOLIAH, a great city, a teeming metropolis. Only after seeing this great city with all its complex affairs did Abraham arrive at the belief in G-d. Thus it is, too, with Isaac who, according to our Sages, saw through the Heavens as he lay bound on the AKEDAH; and Jacob who dedicated an altar to G-d after he beheld Him, in a prophetic
dream, step a ladder extending into heaven and upon which angels climbed. All of these were exceptional events or visions - the revelation of G-d as EL SHADDAI, power and majesty.

Moses, however, built upon this foundation a greater sort of Reverence. He knew G-d by the Tetragrammaton - that is, the Name of Four letters. Now the root of this name is the word HAYAYAH, which means "existence". Moses saw G-d not only in displays of Divine might and splendor, but also in everyday, ordinary existence. He saw G-d not only in the Burning Bush, but also in the routine labor of his fellow-Hebrews; not only in the dramatic revelation atop Mount Sinai, but also in the ordinary social affairs of his people in the desert, ordinary affairs which are to be governed by Ten Commandments. XXX HAYAH, regular and normal existence bespoke, to Moses, the name of G-d and filled him with holy reverence.

It is this sort of Fear of G-d or Reverence, therefore, which must be our aim - discovering G-d's pattern and direction in HAYAYAH, in the normal course and routine of daily living. And it is something which must be studied and studied well.

IV. The third, and final, point which we must make concerning the Jewish meaning of Fear is this: Reverence, no matter how profound or uplifting, must not remain merely a detached attitude. It must be more than an abstraction or religious idea or spiritual emotion. The ultimate Jewish test must be applied to Reverence as it must to all other religious ideas. And that is: what does it accomplish? A YERAI SHEMAYIM, in the Jewish sense, is someone who, out of reverence for G-d, abides by His commandments. When King Solomon sums up, in one verse, all the deep philosophical thoughts of his Ecclesiastes, he says: SOF DAVAR HAKOL NISHMA, ES HA'ELOKIM YERA VE'ES MITZVOSAV SHMOR, "the conclusion of the entire matter is this: Fear G-d and observe His commandments". So that the Fear of G-d, Reverence, must always be followed by ES MITZVOSAV SHMOR, the practical observance of the Mitzvos. Otherwise Reverence remains a hollow emotion; his deeds as well as his words must be guided by a moral rhythm, and his whole being as well as his thoughts -
by an inner, G-d directed harmony.

And this idea, my friends, is clearly revealed in the famous words of the angel as he dramatically addresses Abraham: ATA YADATI KI YERAI ELOKIM ATA, "for now I know that thou fearest G-d". Why, we wonder, only now? Abraham had from his youth believed in and conceived of one G-d, he had worshipped Him and served Him faithfully. And yet the angel says "Now I know." But the answer is obvious. These words were enunciated as Abraham was about to sacrifice his son Isaac on the Akedah. Then, and only then, does G-d say "Now I know"; because, as the rest of that same verse indicated, VELO CHASCHTA ES PINCHA ES YECHIDQA MEMENI, "Now I know that thou fearest G-d, seeing that thou hast not withheld thy only son from me". Abraham's Fear, his reverence, was officially acknowledged by G-d only when he was ready to put into practice the feelings he felt. ATA YADATI, "Now I know", now that the knife is in your hand, ready even to sacrifice your own beloved son because you want to do my bidding, now that you have shown that you are willing to sacrifice all that you have for this belief which you entertain, now do I know that you are a reverent man.

V. In summary, then, we have made three points, First, Fear of G-d means more than Fear of retribution; it means also reverence which comes from wonder and awe. Secondly, we must strive to be inspired to reverence not only by special events or scenes, but also by ordinary matters in the daily business of living. And thirdly, this feeling of reverence for G-d must be translated into good and reverent deeds.

LE'LOAM YEHAI ADAM YERAI SHAMAYIM BE'SESSER UVAGALUY. A man must be G-d fearing, reverent, LE'OLAM - not only "always" but also LE'OLAM - "to the world", in action towards his fellow men, as well as in thought within himself, in deed as well as creed. And this reverence must be inculcated into him not only BE'SESSER, not only from things hidden and mysterious, mighty and beholden, but also EAGALUY, from things common and revealed, open and obvious, plain and simple. Only then can man become MODEH AL HA'EMESS, one who pursues Truth and outwits it.