

My Fear of Fear: ובכן תן פחדך

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August drifts along at its drowsy, lazy, leisurely pace, with long days spent lounging outdoors between hammock and pool, with family and friends. Slowly we inch our way towards September, when the new school year will force us back into a structured routine of early mornings of alarm clocks and the daily march of demanding to-do lists. For us Jews there is yet another transition in mood at this time of year, as the month of Elul appears on the horizon, heralding *Tishrei*, the most intense month in the Hebrew calendar. Like a boisterous school boy willing August to stretch beyond its 31 days, I suspect I am not alone in pulling the metaphorical blanket over my head, wishing to hold on to the last moments of blissful summer and to disregard Elul's urgent message to shape up. Elul spells fear of Divine Judgement and retribution, and that fear makes me nervous and uncomfortable. I find myself fearing fear itself.

I have been there before, wishing to skip this tense frightening month of Elul with its call for self-scrutiny, digging up wrong doings I would rather forget, burdened by guilt and fearing the consequences of my poor choices. Would not a smooth August – September transition be a happier way to celebrate the Jewish new year? As a teaching colleague and friend once put it, we start the new semester trying to catch our breath, while at the same time riding the emotional roller coaster of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Succot. My friend often finds herself thinking, "I can't wait for *Cheshvan*," the month following *Tishrei* where there are no frenetic Jewish landmarks to punctuate the quiet routine.

One strategy I made use of in the past to combat this discomfort, was to focus on the less daunting aspects of the Days of Awe; the joy

evoked by the coronation of Hashem on Rosh Hashanah and the happiness of achieving atonement on Yom Kippur. Perhaps this celebratory tone is a more positive and affirming way to approach a new year, simultaneously serving to protect me from those uncomfortable feelings. Yet, eliminating the element of fear completely from the holidays known as the Days of Awe, is not really in line with the liturgy that we read. Capturing the essence of these days, our Sages instituted a special prayer in which we beseech Hashem to imbue us with fear. This prayer is incorporated in the third blessing of every *amidah* (*Shemoneh Esrei*) prayer of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

And so grant that
your awe, Hashem
will be upon all your
works and your dread
upon all you have
created

ובכן תן פחדך ה' א-להינו
על כל מעשיך ואימתך על
כל מה שבראת

Fear, it seems, is not just an inevitable side effect of the days of judgement, it is an integral feature that we actually request, in every one of the 13 *amidah* prayers of the High Holiday. How am I supposed to repeat this plea to be endowed with fear while at the time trying so hard to avoid it?

Echoing my sentiment, an eminent psychiatrist, acutely aware of the unhealthy mental toll that fear has on mankind, once suggested to Rav Soloveitchik that if he personally had the authority, he would omit this prayer. Why should one pray for fear when fear, or anxiety, is one of the major causes of mental illness?

In response, the Rav elaborated on the universal experience of fear, listing the various vulnerabilities that are innate to the human condition.

“Everyone seems to be beset with fears of all kinds. Some are afraid that they will not be able to succeed in their careers, others fear losing their wealth or status or that they will fail to attain sufficient prominence. Many people are afraid of sickness and bodily weakness. In generations past, fear of leprosy engulfed the world; today people live in fear of cancerous growth. Many people do not go to see a doctor even when they have pains lest he diagnose “the disease.” And in 2020, robbed of the security of a predictable world, Corona tops the list of anxiety triggers that has afflicted all humans.

The Rav continues in his *drashah* as brought down in the book “On Repentance” p. 223, “Man is plagued constantly by all sorts of lesser fears. I am not a psychiatrist, but I do know that one major source of fear can wipe out all these lesser fears. What fear can overtake man, thereby uprooting all other fears, such as that of failure, of poverty, of old age, of rejection or of disease? Only the fear of the Lord! That is the reason behind the expression in the High Holy Day prayer, Cast [Your] fear, O Lord our G-d, upon all [Your] handiwork and [Your] awe upon all that [You have] created.)” We pray that this great fear will free us from those other ones which lurk everywhere, upsetting our lives. “

Or as Rabbi Rachamim Buchrise of Djerba so eloquently put it: “If you fear the One, you will fear no one, if you don’t fear the One, you will fear everyone.”

With this beautiful message the prominent Dayan of Djerva sought to encourage his anxious son, about to embark on the hazardous trip to the Land of Israel. In the late 1800s the sea voyage from Tunisia to the Holy Land was indeed fraught with dangers. Yet the fear of the One, can redeem us of every other fear.

In other words, a fear-free life is not an attainable goal. Nor is it a desirable one. We are hard wired to experience fear. We need fear. It keeps us from harm. It protects us from getting burned. From falling off the cliff. From entering a place of mortal danger. It is a survival instinct. A gift from G-d. Yet like any one other emotion it must be balanced to allow us to function well. On the Days of Awe we are not asking for more anxieties and phobias. Our prayer to be granted fear of the Divine is in fact a remedy for all the lesser fears that inflict us threatening our mental well-being.

With that in mind we can understand the frequent commandment addressed to the giants of faith in the Torah when they faced dire circumstances: “*Al tira* – Fear not!”, implying that they indeed felt fear too. The most courageous heroes, Avraham, Moshe, David were not fearless. Only a fool is fearless when dangers are real. The hero, however, is the one who somehow hears G-d’s urging “*al tira*” and acts despite his or her fears. A careful reading reveals that the commandment not to fear the impending dangers is in most instances followed by the reassurance of the Divine’s Presence. Just when they felt most vulnerable, most alone, so many of our prophets heard and delivered G-d’s message of hope: “Fear not, for I am with you. Do not be frightened, for I am your G-d.”

And what does the repetition of this commandment say about our G-d? As big as our fears are, G-d is bigger still. Because the Eternal One is constant and whole, G-d can contain our fears, absorb the shock of them, until we feel ourselves strong enough to carry on. Sometimes just a whisper, sometimes a shout, the Divine command, “*al tir’u*,” echoes and reverberates throughout Jewish history, urging our people onward, come what may.

There is one kind of fear, however, which is encouraged: *yirat Hashem* “fear of G-d.” In contrast to the verb “*pachad*,” “*yirah*” is often translated more softly as “reverence” or “awe,”

yirat Hashem is a distinct mitzvah intended to put all other fears into perspective

Rav Soloveitchik explains the difference between the two Hebrew synonyms for fear: *pachad* and *yirah*. *Pachad* [fear] is an overwhelming paralyzing emotional state, as in the experience described in the prayer *U'netaneh Tokef*: "And the great shofar will be sounded and a still, thin voice will be heard, and the angels shake, terror and trembling will seize them" In contrast *yirah* (awe) "suggests reverence and loyalty, as exemplified in the Biblical command, "Every man shall revere (*tira'u*) his mother and father" (Leviticus 19:3)." In this sense *yirah* (awe) is not simply an emotion, but it is also a call for action. *Yirah* (awe) forms the basis for an intricate system of behaviors that guide and govern a person's relationship to his or her parents, teachers, and even G-d.

According to the Rav's interpretation, we pray for the capacity to transform the initial paralyzing fear aroused with the advance of the Days of Awe into a mobilizing constructive force – *yirah*. We begin by asking for fear *uvechen ten pachdecha* and continue to express our desire for the more mature stage of reverence – *veyira'ucha kol hama'asim*.

The next lines of the prayer describe the revolutionary effect of *yirah* on mankind.

And all created beings will prostrate themselves before You and may they all form a single band to do Your will with a perfect heart.

וּשְׂתַחֲוּ לְפָנֶיךָ כָּל
הַבְּרִואִים וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֹלָם
אִגּוּדָה אַחַת לַעֲשׂוֹת
רְצוֹנְךָ בְּלִבָּב שְׁלָם

Indeed it is this ideal picture of a transformed humanity which is the focus of our prayers during the Days of Awe. The paralyzing fear invoked by judgment, though uncomfortable, is the conduit to achieve the more mature stage of reverence. Rabbi Yitchak Balazer reiterates this process using a slightly different terminology. The fear of divine retribution *yirat ha'onesh* is the first rung in the ladder. It is tangible and must be cultivated first before we can ascend the next rung of *yirat haromemut* – reverence.

As we edge our way closer to Hashem through the month of Elul, slowly closing the gap that has separated us from Him, we come to the Day of Judgement and plead to be imbued with the fear of heaven that will release us of all our debilitating fears. We ask to be constantly cognizant of the heavenly umbrella, metaphorically speaking, so that we do not need to worry about the elements. To focus on the One and Only who is really in control of every aspect of our lives instead of wrongly attributing the focus of control in our lives to earthly sources - the president, our boss, Iran, cancer, Corona, or the myriad of other possibilities, relevant in each of our personal lives.

We conclude the long services of the Days of Awe with the verse from Psalms incorporated in the beautifully haunting *piyyut*: *Adon Olam, Hashem li, velo ira* - G-d is with me, I shall not fear. We sing these treasured words as we make our way from the sanctuary to the outside world. Armed with an internal fear and in awe of Hashem, we are liberated from all other earthly fears, ready to face with courage the perils of the outside and use our *yirah/awe* as a constructive mobilizing force.

With the fear of **The One** deeply entrenched in our hearts, we fear no one.

What a reassuring way to start a new year!