

## What Does God Want of You?

Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. III, p. 157

The Torah expects us to feel both love and awe - Ahava and Yir'a - for God:

וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיָּהּ אֵל לִחְיֶיהָ שְׂאֵל מִעַמּוּךְ  
כִּי אִם-לִירְאָה אֶת־ה' אֵל לִחְיֶיהָ לְלַכֵּת  
בְּכָל-דְּרָכָיו וּלְאֲהַבָּה אֹתוֹ וְלַעֲבֹד אֶת־ה'  
אֵל לִחְיֶיהָ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ:

"And now, Israel, what does God want of you? Only that you be in awe of the Eternal your God, following in all His paths and loving Him...." (D'varim 10:12)

What is awe of God? Why is this trait so important?

### Two Types of Awe

There are different levels of Yir'a. There is Yir'at Shamayim - awe of Heaven. And there is Yir'at Cheit - literally, "fear of sin", but better translated as "repulsion from sin".

These two forms of Yir'a share the same root of awe and reverence. Yir'at Shamayim is a mindset, expressed in our thoughts and feelings. Yir'at Cheit, on the other hand, is more practical, expressed in deed and action. As a

result of our perception of God's infinite greatness, we feel reverence towards God - Yirwat Shamayim - and are acutely aware of the repugnance of sin - Yirat Cheit.

(There is a third type of fear, Yir'at Onesh - "fear of punishment". However, this trait reflects a weak personality. It is not a beneficial trait that should be emulated.)

### Love and Awe

Love and Awe are opposite traits. Our attraction to good and holiness - the positive quality of Ahava - inevitably leads us to wisdom and love. Our revulsion from all that is evil and defiling - the inverse quality of Yir'a - helps purify our thoughts and actions.

They are converse traits, yet they are interconnected. Because of our attraction to good, we are repelled by evil. And by avoiding evil, we remain on the path of life, directed towards beneficial aspirations and yearnings.

The Sages disagreed on the basic question: which is the more important trait? Which quality is greater - love of God, or awe of Heaven?

The Talmud (Shabbat 31b) quotes a discussion between Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Simon. The two rabbis were sitting together when a third scholar passed by.

Rabbi Elazar turned to Rabbi Simon. "Let us stand up out of respect for this God-fearing individual."

Rabbi Simon replied, "Let us stand up for this great scholar of Torah!"

Rabbi Elazar did not back down. "I mentioned his greater quality - that he is God-fearing - and you insist on emphasizing a lesser quality!"

Rabbi Elazar felt that awe of Heaven is the more fundamental trait. He would often say, "The Holy One has only awe of Heaven in His world." He further declared that awe of God is the basis of all wisdom; in fact, it is the only true wisdom in the world. What does this mean?

## The True Foundation

Rabbi Elazar calls our attention to God's purpose in creating the universe. This is in fact a riddle of sorts. We cannot solve this conundrum by pointing out some advantage gained by creating the world. To posit that creation enabled some positive gain implies that this process brought about improvement and advance. Yet, the height of perfection already existed before creation, with God's sole existence. What gain could there be in creating the world and its inhabitants?

The benefit in creating the world can only be understood from a negative perspective - in the intended creation of a limited, finite world. That which is finite is naturally drawn towards the infinite. The very limitation of all things in their value and purpose is the ultimate good that the universe receives from its Creator. The loftiest relationship to God is found in this

awe-inspiring sense of our distance and insignificance. It is from these feelings of awe that all positive yearnings and love are developed.

When we acquire this form of wisdom, by contemplating the Infinite in order to experience awe and reverence, a lofty Yir'at Shamayim makes its mark on the soul. These feelings of awe will generate an intense love for God, a longing to contemplate God's light and ways, His mitzvot and His Torah.

This is the meaning of Rabbi Elazar's statement, "The Holy One has only awe of Heaven in His world." Besides awe, nothing else needs to exist. Nothing else can exist. When the mind's inner image of reverence expresses itself in the realm of action, it produces a revulsion of sin. By avoiding all obstacles, we may ascend the path towards the elevated light from the Source of life.

This profound image, secreted in the recesses of the mind, identifies the finite nature of the universe as the primary force in both Creation and practical ethical behavior. "Behold, awe of God - that is wisdom!" (Iyov 28:28). Awe of God is the only true wisdom; it is the foundation for all other studies.

Thus Rabbi Elazar pronounced the trait of Yir'at Shamayim to be the most fundamental and inclusive trait. And he honored the passing scholar for possessing this crucial quality. 