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Rav Kook: Developing Authentic Awe

(*Midot HaRa'aya: Yir'ah, Piska #5*)

Rav Kook distinguishes between the fear of God's punishment (*yirat ha'onesh*), awe before God's grandeur (*yirat ha'romemut*), and love of God:

"The fear of God's punishment is to be differentiated from fear in the sense of awe before the grandeur of God and from the sensibility of love for Him..." (*Midot HaRa'aya, Yir'ah, piska #5*)

There is a profound difference between a relationship with God that revolves around fear of punishment and one in which a person is drawn to God by His greatness and magnificence.

In the same passage, Rav Kook illustrates this distinction with a beautiful metaphor:

"The fear of God's punishment is like seeds planted in a garden. They are not eaten but are first planted in a small, narrow row, where they cannot reach full fruition. Once they reach an initial stage of growth and are capable of bearing fruit, they are uprooted and replanted in a large, spacious garden. There they reach full fruition and become good food for people to enjoy."

The early stage of growth represents a less mature conception of fear—one rooted primarily in concern over punishment and discipline. This stage is necessary, but it is

only the beginning of spiritual development. True growth occurs when one progresses toward recognizing God's majesty and is drawn to Him through love and awe.

In a similar vein, Rav Kook employs another evocative metaphor (*ibid., piska #7*): the sediment at the bottom of a bottle of wine. Fear of punishment is likened to the dregs—an unavoidable part of the process of producing fine wine. Upon this "crude foundation," Rav Kook writes, "are built august edifices, noble thoughts and aspirations, enchanting the eye with their beauty." He concludes by citing the well-known verse: "*The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord*" (Psalms 111:10).

RAMBAM: FEAR AND LOVE

The Rambam, in describing the mitzvah of fearing God, presents fear and love as complementary forces. Far from being contradictory, these emotions work together to cultivate an ideal relationship with the Divine.

He writes:

"This honored and awesome God—it is our duty to love and fear Him... When a person contemplates His great and wondrous works and creatures and perceives His immeasurable and infinite wisdom, he immediately loves, praises, and glorifies Him... Yet when

he reflects on these same matters, he recoils in awe and fear, realizing that he is a small, lowly, and limited creature standing before the God who is perfect in knowledge.” (*Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* 2:1-2)

THE TALNER REBBE’S INSIGHT

Rabbi Yitzchak Twersky of Brookline, Massachusetts, the Rebbe of the Talner Shtiebel, was known for sharing profound *divrei Torah* during *Seudah Shlishit*. In discussing Moshe’s encounter with the burning bush, the Torah states:

“Moshe said, ‘I will turn aside and see this great sight—why is the bush not consumed?’” (*Shemot* 3:3)

Rashi understands Moshe’s “turning aside” as a shift of attention—from his previous focus to the miraculous bush. The Talner Rebbe, however, was intrigued by an alternative interpretation offered by the Kli Yakar, who suggests that Moshe actually stepped back from the bush in order to perceive its light. The intensity of the light, writes the Kli Yakar, initially prevented Moshe from grasping its essence.

The Rebbe saw in this image a powerful metaphor for the relationship between love and fear of God. We are drawn toward divine

light, yet simultaneously compelled to step back in awe and trepidation. This tension lies at the heart of authentic religious experience.

A devoted student of the Rambam, the Talner Rebbe suggested



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that this is precisely the dialectic described in *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* (2:1-2): the oscillation between love and fear that defines genuine engagement with God. (See *Torah of the Mind, Torah of the Heart*, R. Twersky, ed. David Shapiro, pp. 103-105.)

DEVELOPING AWE OF GOD

The Talmud (Menachot 43b) teaches that one is obligated to recite one hundred blessings each day. This obligation is derived from the verse:

“And now, Israel, what (*mah*) does Hashem your God ask of you?” (*Devarim* 10:12)

Although the Talmud does not explain the derivation explicitly, Rashi notes that the word *mah* (“what”) can be read as *me’ah* (“one hundred”). Thus, the verse can be interpreted as: “Now, Israel, Hashem your God asks one hundred of you”—a reference to the daily obligation of one hundred blessings.

By filling our days with blessings—during prayer, before and after eating, and throughout ordinary moments—we invite God’s presence into our lives. Pausing to acknowledge that our sustenance comes from divine generosity opens our awareness to the heavenly light that permeates the world.

THE BRISKER RAV AND THE HUNDRED BLESSINGS

A story is told about the Brisker Rav, Rabbi Yitzchak Ze’ev Soloveitchik, who was once a guest in a home in Switzerland. On Shabbat afternoon, he asked for a banana and an apple, but did not eat them. The fruit was brought to the Brisker Rav but the fruit

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remained untouched. After Shabbat the host finally gathered the courage to ask why he requested the two fruits and proceeded not to eat either of them.

The Brisker Rav explained that he initially needed the fruit because he was missing two blessings to complete the required hundred. (An apple requires the blessing *borei pri ha'etz*, and a banana requires *borei pri ha'adamah*.) However, during the afternoon Mincha davening he was called to the Torah, where he recited two blessings—one before the reading and one after—thus fulfilling his obligation.

This story illustrates the meticulous care with which one should approach mitzvot, particularly blessings. When recited with intention, blessings infuse daily life with an awareness of God's presence and omnipotence.

SINCERE AWE OF THE ALMIGHTY

Rav Kook writes:

“The fear of God itself must submit to the discipline of the fear of God.” (*Midot HaRa'aya, piska #10*)

This enigmatic statement suggests that even one's fear of God must be examined and refined. When fear becomes habitual or rote, it risks becoming superficial and empty.

The Rebbe of Kotzk, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, once observed that early Chassidism was so spiritually intense and ethereal that it required physical boundaries. This gave rise to distinctive garments—the *shtreimel*, *kapoteh*, and *gartel*—meant to contain lofty spiritual energies. Today, he lamented, the opposite is often true: the external trappings remain, but the inner depth and fervor are sometimes lacking. The clothing endures, but the heart and soul are impoverished. (*Midot*

HaRa'aya, Soltonovitch, p. 265)

Another poignant Chassidic story reinforces this message. At Chassidic weddings, it is customary for a *badchan* (jester) to entertain the bride and groom. On one occasion, a *badchan* asked Rav Yoel Teitelbaum, the Satmar Rebbe, for permission to imitate his distinctive style of prayer. The Rebbe consented.

As the performance continued, the *badchan* noticed tears streaming down the Rebbe's face. Alarmed, he stopped and apologized, fearing he had been disrespectful.

“I am not crying because I was insulted,” the Rebbe replied. “As I watched you, I began to wonder: if others can imitate me so well, perhaps I, too, am merely imitating myself.” (*The Six Constant Mitzvot*, R. Berkowitz, p. 213)

The Satmar Rebbe was asking a piercing question: *Am I praying with sincerity and depth, or am I merely going through the motions?* It is a question we must all ask ourselves—to regularly examine whether our service of God is authentic or mechanical.

LESSONS FOR LIFE

- Kiss the mezuzah when entering or leaving your home, reminding yourself that God created the world and watches over all that you do.
- Trust that everything unfolds according to God's plan. Even painful experiences ultimately serve a higher purpose.
- During prayer, pause over a single line and read it with fresh eyes and an open heart. ■



Rabbi Goldscheider's most recent OU Press Publication, “Torah United” on the weekly Parsha, can be ordered directly from Rabbi Goldscheider at aarong@ouisrael.org at a special price for Torah Tidbits readers.