

Spiritual Healing in the Torah

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Parashat Ekev

Why is Fear the Opening to Enter the Gate of Love?

An Instant Gratification Generation

We are an impatient instant gratification generation. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that our entire century is characterized by impatience and craving for instant gratification. Everyone wants a shortcut to reach their goals fast. Children skip grades, mothers buy instant soup and instant cake mix, while fathers drink instant coffee. We skip to the conclusion of a research article or read just the abstract. Even when we get our hands on a new novel, we cheat and read the end first. If we like it, we may go back to the beginning. Also, in Torah, we desire shortcuts that give us the deepest instant message in the fewest words. That's why some students yearn for Chassidic pearls but may have less patience for learning the minutia of the detailed halachot to keep them to perfection. In our spiritual work, it seems that the last few generations connect much more to the concept of *Ahavat Hashem* – Loving Hashem – which Chassidism emphasizes – than to the concept of *Yirat Hashem* – Fearing Hashem – which is quite foreign even for many – I was going to say – ‘G-d fearing people’! The concept of fear seems too solemn and formal for our disrespectful generation. We want the skip to the real deep stuff, we want to connect; we want the umph in our spiritual service, and we want to feel Hashem's closeness, but are we ready to do the hard work and go through all the steps to get us there?

Why does the Torah Ask us to Fear G-d before Loving Hashem?

In *Parashat Ekev*, we read that the first step in our divine worship is “only to fear Hashem:”

ספר דברים פרק י' פסוק יב ועתה ישראל מה השם אלהיך שאל מעמך כי אם ליראה את השם אלהיך ללכת בכל דרכיו ולאהבה אתו ולעבד את השם אלהיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך:

“And now, O Israel, what does Hashem, your G-d, ask of you? Only to fear Hashem, your G-d, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, and to worship Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul” (*Devarim* 10:12).

Netivot Shalom asks: since we know that *Ahavat Hashem* is at a higher level than *Yirat Hashem* why does our verse precede fear of G-d to love of G-d? The same question can be asked on *Tehillim* 111:10: “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of Hashem; good understanding to all who perform them; his praise endures forever,” and on the verses following the *Shema Yisrael* that emphasize loving G-d. The Talmud teaches that it is greater to fulfill the mitzvot from love rather than from fear (*Babylonian Talmud, Sotah* 31a). The positive mitzvot which are linked with ‘love of G-d’ are greater than the negative mitzvot connected with ‘fear of G-d.’ Yet, only by cultivating fear of G-d can we reach the level of loving Hashem and serving Him with heart and soul. Although loving G-d and cleaving to Him is the highest level and the end goal towards which we strive, due to our yetzer hara (negative impulse), we can only reach this level by first eradicating this negative impulse through obtaining fear of G-d. As long as we haven't purified ourselves from this inherent negative inclination as it states, “for the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth” (*Bereishit* 8:21), it is impossible to reach true love of G-d.

Fear of G-d – The First Step to Self-Refinement

According to Ohr Hachayim the reason that G-d asks only that we serve Him out of fear, and that

He is seemingly satisfied with this level of service is that fear is an all-embracing emotion. When a person is afraid of the consequences of doing wrong, he will make certain that he does not do anything wrong. Moreover, Moshe hints that fear, i.e., reverence for G-d is a prerequisite of love for G-d. This is understood from his prefaces of our verse with the word וְעַתָּה /ve'ata - "and now." This teaches us that **for now**, initially, all that G-d asks for is to fear Him, although this is not the final goal in serving Hashem. The expression וְעַתָּה /ve'ata - "and now" also refers to teshuva (Rav Tzaddok of Lublin, *Pri Tzaddik, Bereishit 8* based on *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 21*). The midrash learns this concept specifically from our Torah verse. By means of fear of G-d we can repent as Rashi says, "Even though you did all this, His compassion and affection are still upon you, and with all that you have sinned against Him, He demands nothing of you, except only to fear [Hashem, your G-d]. How does fear of G-d help us to repent? Since the negative impulse that caused us to sin is not logical, it is not possible to uproot it through even the sharpest intellectual approach. Yet fear of G-d purifies the flesh and blood, therefore it is the foundation of teshuva. This is appropriate for preparing for the month of Elul - the month of teshuva! Through fear of G-d, we can remove the impure lusts and return to purity and acquire true love of G-d, for fear is the opening to enter the gate of love. The reason for this is that a Jew is a part of G-d from above, and the Shechinah dwells within us, therefore it is natural for a Jew to love Hashem. It is only the negative impulse that blocks our natural love of G-d. That is why it's impossible to achieve love of G-d except through fear that refines and purifies us from negative cravings.

Tapping into the Light of Shabbat by Beginning with Awe of G-d

The main fear of G-d is awe of Hashem's greatness. By feeling the greatness of the Creator in our hearts we come to have awe of Him. The way to come to awe and love of G-d is through contemplating the deeds of creation and its great wonders. This makes us in awe of Hashem's infinitely great wisdom, though being mindful in this way of the greatness of Hashem's creation, we can achieve both awe and love of G-d. The *Zohar* points out that the word בְּרֵאשִׁית /bereishit consists of the same letters as the two words יִרְאָה /yirah - 'awe' and שַׁבָּת /Shabbat' What is the connection between Shabbat and fear or awe of G-d? Shabbat is arousal from above connected with love of G-d, as we know that Shabbat is designated to be Israel's soulmate (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 11:9*). Yet, only by purifying ourselves through fear/awe of G-d will we be able to tap into the light of Shabbat and the love of G-d inherent in the holy Shabbat. We learn this concept from the word *Bereishit* which means "in the beginning." Only by beginning with awe of G-d can we attain the elevated levels of Shabbat. In the same way, we begin the new year with the days of awe where the emphasis also is on fear/awe of G-d.

Emulating Hashem is a Prerequisite to Achieving Love of G-d

Why are the concepts of awe and love of G-d separated by the clause "to walk in His ways"? There are three levels: Through acquiring fear of G-d we purify ourselves from the inclination to go astray from the straight path which enables us to walk in Hashem's ways, which in return brings us to the highest level of love of G-d. Thus walking "in all His ways" is a preliminary preparation for learning to love Hashem. To walk in Hashem's ways means to emulate His character traits, just as He is compassionate so must we be (*Sifri Parashat Ekev Piska 13*). Therefore, loving our fellow Jews is a spiritual remedy for achieving love of G-d. By walking in all of Hashem's ways and purifying our character traits we may be able to achieve true love of Hashem!

EmunaHealing Exercise for Activating and Balancing our Will with Hashem'

1. Make yourself comfortable wherever you are and allow yourself to relax into your seat. Let your thoughts pass through you as you notice them without judging them. Breathe deeply and relax even more.
2. As you breathe slowly, contemplate the deeds of creation and its great wonders. Contemplate the greatness of everything Hashem has created and keep recreating every single second. Can anyone emulate the formation of the fruits on the trees... the intricate ecosystem, the orbits of the sun and the planets. "The heavens recite the glory of G-d, and the sky tells of the work of His hands" (*Tehillim* 19:2). Think about how Hashem created humanity with such wisdom... contemplate in details of the human body and how each limb and organ work together to maintain us. Think of the amazing digestive system that no other than G-d could conceive of.
3. The wonders of Hashem's creation arouse awe of G-d. "What is it that G-d asks...only that you fear Him." Fearing Hashem is surely not such an easy thing. In absolute terms, serving Hashem out of fear is something very great indeed. Can you get a feeling of Hashem's awesome greatness that makes you recoil? Get in touch with your own minuscule smallness compared to the Almighty's unparalleled magnitude. You have the opportunity to serve the greatest, most elevated being in the world. Do not let this opportunity pass by but make yourself ready to serve with all your heart, soul, and might.
4. Envision your worldly desires and negative cravings as a thick, black cloud. Your unrefined lust to stuff your face with more food than is good for you; your jealousy of the possessions and talents of others; your base need for compliments and attention etc. Now visualize how your awe of G-d becomes a bright light that makes the black cloud of your negative emotions evaporate, purifying you from your unholy cravings.
5. Allow yourself to feel how the blocks that have been blocking you from cleaving to G-d, are releasing. See if you feel lighter and more ready to serve G-d now.
6. G-d is compassionate and forgiving, His kindness has no bounds, and He is the ultimate truth. Every possible good character trait is the way of Hashem. We are commanded to walk in G-d's ways, by emulating Hashem's character traits. Which character trait are you ready to work on right now? Imagine yourself acting, speaking, and thinking through having acquired the desired good trait.
7. Keep breathing and meditate on the concept of "fear is the opening to enter the gate of love." Open your heart to feel Hashem's infinite love for you. Contemplate all the blessings in your life that He has granted you. Even if you are going through a rough time, there are always some moments of goodness within each challenging test. Let your feeling of gratefulness fill your heart and spill over to become the deepest love of G-d that you are able to experience right now.
8. Imagine going about your life with this inner feeling of love of G-d permeating your every thought, speech, and action. When you are ready, open your eyes and return to the room with a resolve to walk in the way of G-d and come closer to Hashem in every mundane task in your everyday life.