

Ekev: A World Without Awe

Moshe Taragin

Worrying about a possible religious erosion once he is retired, Moshe exhorts the Jewish people toward the trait of yirat shamayim. He presents this trait as foundational but also as a portal- excellence at yirat shamayim serves as a gateway to general religious success. This trait should ideally enable moral development, mitzvah obedience, as well as profound love of G-d.

Moshe also casts yirat shamayim as 'effortless' prompting Chazal to wonder "atu yirata milta zutrata ninhu"- is yirat shamayim as trivial as Moshe suggests? The gemara ultimately acknowledges that for someone of Moshe's caliber yirat shamayim is indeed straightforward. For most of us the process is a bit more complicated and a bit more "knotty" than Moshe portrays.

In many respects, fostering yirat shamayim has become even more challenging in the modern era. For those living in Israel and sensing the budding partnership with G-d in historical restoration- the challenge of yirat shamayim is steep. Yirat shamayim is based upon a clear hierarchy between G-d and man. For many in Israel, the palpable sense of historical partnership dismantles that hierarchy thereby thwarting the development of yirat shamayim.

However, even for those who aren't giddied by this renewed partnership, yirat shamayim remains a significant challenge. Ideally, yirat shamayim doesn't prompt fear and trembling but rather awe and submission. We stand in awe of our Creator acknowledging that we cannot comprehend His essence not can we fully decipher His will. This acknowledgement should yield awe which in turn should facilitate submission.

However, we are all citizens of a modern world which has become 'un-awed'. Science has seemingly lifted the veil of mystery from our vast planet; it has also allowed us to chart the inner recesses of human identity and to map the pathways of human cognition. Additionally, over the past century, humanity has waged two brutal wars against malevolent forces threatening human freedom. Modern Man views himself as brave and courageous not sniveling and cowering. We don't view our world as mysterious, and we certainly don't feel enfeebled by the great abyss. The trait of 'awe' is in short supply and yirat shamayim is sometimes in retreat. Restoring 'awe' to our world is the first step toward constructing authentic yirat shamayim in the Modern City.

"Outside-In" Prayers

The parsha also recounts Moshe's furious prayers on behalf of a fallen nation. He stands literally and figuratively "alone" on a quiet mountain praying fervently to stave off the threatened annihilation of his beloved people. We typically associate prayer with 'quiet' moments of concentration or profound moments of emotional awakening. We desperately attempt to "block out" external commotions or to battle through distracting thoughts. We pursue an inner stillness or tranquility; we attempt to attune our inner thoughts to this great Divine rendezvous.

Twice this past week, I experienced a very different form of tefilla. As I don't pray in the Beit Midrash during the three weeks of bein hazemanim, my prayer backdrops greatly diversify. I happen to be typing these words thousands of miles above a vast ocean in route to

Budapest. I look forward to profound tefillos in the districts inhabited by so many of our ancestors.

Last week I attended a Nefesh B'nefesh event greeting hundreds of recent Olim/arrivals. The atmosphere was electric: elation, tears, families greeting arriving members, soldiers, politicians, blaring bands, flag-waving babies. As we arrived late, we assembled a minyan in the huge tent housing this carnival. It was impossible to hear our own words, let alone sink into an inner peaceful state of serenity.

Yet despite the 'distractions' it was possibly one my most memorable and heartfelt prayers. How could I not tear while reciting verses promising our return to our land while I was literally living the script I was reciting? Recalling these ancient Divine promises while witnessing their fulfillment made me tremble with emotion.

This Shacharit reminded me that, often, the emotions of our prayers draw their vitality and their vigor primarily from our surroundings and not despite those surrounding or in defiance of those surroundings. Sometimes our kavana is "inside out"- stemming from a deep quiet and personal place; other times they are "outside-in"- drawing their energy from our backdrops and only subsequently percolating into our deepest consciousness. Perhaps we should be more sensitive to this second, less common form of prayer. Perhaps we should more often allow ourselves to become "lost" in the broader setting and allow that setting to animate our emotions and our spirit.

Later that evening my family and I attended the Klezmer festival in Tzefat. This is a yearly musical festival celebrating classic Jewish music – particularly some of the soulful music associated with the mystical city of Zefat. It drew a broad-spectrummed audience from almost every sector of Israel and offered a diverse assortment of Jewish-inspired music. Reciting Ma'ariv alongside the strains of this music provided an

additional opportunity to become “lost” in my surroundings. How many Jews prayed on these magical hilltops to what often seemed like a distant G-d. How many tender songs were composed by loyal Jews urging G-d to redeem His scattered nation? How fortunate was I to be residing in Zefat under Jewish rule for the first time since our Sages fled to the North of Israel to escape Roman persecution 2000 years ago? What price would those very Sages pay to walk a mile in modern day Zefat or to attend the Klezmer festival?

Our prayers are a compass to our soul, and this week my soul surged. This week my spirit wasn't generated internally but was powered by the events I attended and was fueled by my people and their history.