

Parashat Behar 5776, 2016:

“And You Shall Fear Your G-d”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Sefer Vayikra is the sole book in the Tanach wherein the phrase “*v’yarata m’elokecha*” (“and you shall fear your G-d”) is found. It appears three times in Parashat Behar and twice in Parashat Kedoshim:

- 1) You shall not curse a deaf person. You shall not place a stumbling block before a blind person, and you shall fear your G-d. I am the L-rd. (19:14)
- 2) You shall rise before a venerable person and you shall respect the elderly, and you shall fear your G-d. I am the L-rd. (19:32)
- 3) And you shall not wrong, one man his fellow Jew, and you shall fear your G-d, for I am the L-rd, your G-d. (25:17)
- 4) You shall not take from him interest or increase, and you shall fear your G-d, and let your brother live with you. (25:36)
- 5) You shall not work him with rigor, and you shall fear your G-d. (25:33, these and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own)

Our five verses refer respectively to: the prohibition of purposely misleading someone to your own financial advantage (*lifnei ivare*), the obligation to rise before and treat the elderly with respect (*mipnei saivah takum*), the injunction against vexing your fellow Jew through painful words (*ona’at devarim*), the ban against charging interest to a fellow Jew (*rivet*) and the sanction against mistreating a Jewish slave by forcing he or she to perform worthless and unpleasant work (*avodah b’farech*). At first glance, these *mitzvot* seem to be conceptually distant and disconnected from one another. Yet, Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon the *Sifra*, the halachic *Midrash* to *Sefer Vayikra*, teaches us that the

use of *v'yarata m'elokecha* inextricably links these *pasukim* (verses) one to another:

and you shall fear your G-d: [Why is this mentioned here?] Because this matter [of misadvising someone] is not discernible by people, whether this person had good or evil intentions, and he can avoid [being recriminated by his victim afterwards] by saying, “I meant well!” Therefore, concerning this, it says, “and you shall fear your G-d,” Who knows your thoughts! Likewise, concerning anything known to the one who does it, but to which no one else is privy, Scripture says, “and you shall fear your G-d.” (*Commentary to Sefer Vayikra 19:14, underlining my own*)

Let us briefly review the salient points in Rashi’s gloss:

1. Each of the actions referenced in our *pasukim* are not “discernible by people,” i.e. the actions are essentially hidden from others.
2. Therefore, the underlying intentions inherent in these behaviors remain unknown to observers. As a result, only the active party knows the truth as to whether or not they were performed for the benefit of others or to their detriment.
3. Nothing is hidden from the Almighty – including our very thoughts. As such, one must be continuously in awe of the Master of the Universe and meticulous in his/her *mitzvot* observance.

The great Chasidic rebbe, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1905), known as the “Sefat Emet” after the name of his commentary on the Torah, analyzes and expands upon Rashi’s analysis of *v'yarata m'elokecha* in the following manner:

It is obvious that through fear [of G-d] one is able to properly fulfill those matters that are not discernible by others. [What is less evident,] however, is that these *mitzvot* which are solely contingent upon one’s private intentions, will, through their proper performance, enable one to acquire fear [of the Almighty]. This is the case, since when each *mitzvah* is fulfilled, it alters a person’s actions in a positive fashion. As such, these *mitzvot* that are contingent upon a person’s innermost thoughts, [when performed correctly,] will repair [any negativity that lurks] in the mind of the one [who performs such a commandment]. So, too, did I hear from my teacher and rebbe [Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter, 1798-1866, known as the “Chidushei HaRim,”] *zatzal*, on the verse, “And you shall not wrong, one man his fellow Jew, and you shall fear your G-d, for I am the L-rd, your G-d.” (*Sefer Vayikra 25:17*) As he noted, through punctiliously refraining from vexing one’s fellow Jew, one will merit [the acquisition of the characteristic of] fear before the Almighty... (Translation and brackets my own)

In many important ways, the Sefat Emet’s explication of Rashi’s commentary on our

phrase parallel's the words of the Rambam (Moses Maimonides, 1135-1204) in *The Guide for the Perplexed*:

This purpose to which I have drawn your attention is the purpose of all the actions prescribed by the Law [i.e. the Torah]. For it is by all the particulars of the actions and through their repetition that some excellent men obtain such training that they achieve human perfection, so that they fear, and are in dread and in awe of, G-d, may He be exalted, and know Who it is that is with them and as a result act subsequently as they ought to... I refer to the fear of Him, may He be exalted, and the awe before His command. It [i.e. the Torah] says: "If you do not observe to fulfill all the words of this Torah, which are written in this scroll, to fear this glorious and awesome name, the L-rd, your G-d." (*Sefer Devarim* 28:58) Consider how it is explicitly stated for your benefit that the intention of *all the words of this Law* is one end, namely, *in order that you will fear the Name*. The fact that this end is achieved through actions, you can learn from its dictum in this verse: "If you do not observe to fulfill all the words of this Torah..." For it has already been made clear that this refers to actions prescribed by *commandments and prohibitions... fear* is achieved by means of all actions prescribed by the Law, as we have explained. (Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, III:52, translation, Shlomo Pines, pages 629-630, brackets and underlining my own)

In sum, for both the Rambam and the Sefat Emet, mitzvot actions lead to the acquisition of the spiritual and behavioral quality of *yirat Hashem*. The Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) notes that the word "*nora*" ("awesome") precedes *David Hamelch's* famous statement, "The beginning of Torah knowledge is *yirat Hashem...*" (*Sefer Tehillim* 111:10). Therefore, he suggests that one may legitimately translate *yirat Hashem* as "awe," as well as "fear," of Hashem. As such, may it be His will and our fervent desire that our authentic and heartfelt fulfillment of Hashem's commandments will lead us to view Him in awe, and bring us closer to His holy Torah. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always

happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*,” may be found at:
<http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.